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DOWNSTREAM

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Translated from the Swedish by E. CLASSEN

DOWNSTREAM

A Novel

BY

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GYLDENDAHL

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PART I

I

THE CRY

TO tell the story of a child as one would tell the story of a grown-up would be a misrepresentation, for when one is wide awake it costs a great effort to describe a dream exactly as it occurred.

The tide of events flows remote from the child. Only occasionally and without any conscious significance do its eddies touch upon its consciousness. And it is exactly this inability to understand the connection between events which makes the child's realities so dreamlike.

In the long dream of childhood there reigns a capricious, mysterious, and yet irresistible fate, beneficent like the fairy with its wand beside the princess's cradle or cruel like the wolf in Red Riding Hood. The shadow of that Fate still casts itself over our riper years. It pursues us ghost-like, even when we have begun consciously to order our lives. Only a few chosen spirits are able to cast off the spell of these fancies and trolls.

This is a tale of people whose childhood was passed in the shadow of the wolf—and who never could escape from their childhood.

First let me tell you about that evening many years ago when Peter and Hedvig heard a strange cry coming from the window of their parents' bedroom. The whole of that day it had been evident that something was in the air. The children were not allowed to go into the bedroom at all, nor even to play on the stairs. After lunch there arrived an old lady with a bag. And then an old man in spectacles drove up in a small carriage. It was the doctor. Little Laura ran away immediately and hid herself, so that she should not have to show her tongue. But this time the doctor had not come to see her, for he went straight up to

Mother, and beds were prepared for the children in the grey room downstairs.

Stellan, Laura, and Tord had to go to bed at once, they were so young. But Peter and Hedvig went out on the kitchen steps. There old Kristin sat and told stories of former days at Selambshof when "Old Hök" was alive.

The most remarkable thing about Kristin was that she alone survived from the days of the old owner. She was grey, bent, tough, the incarnation of the everlasting humoured peasant soul. Even if she only talked of a pair of grey stockings, it still sounded like a fairy-tale. And since, moreover, the fatalism of age is closely related to helplessness of childhood, we can well understand that she had two wide-awake listeners in Peter and Hedvig. It was now the great and serious event that was about to occur plunged her into a gloomy, solemn mood. And just as her ancestors for hundreds of grey generations before her had huddled together by the hearth on dark, stormy nights and had told tales of dangers past, so also she now sat in autumn twilight on the kitchen stairs at Selambshof and told ghost stories to the maids and the cowherd about the master. She still looked frightened as she was talking of him. It really sounded as if she had been speaking of some great and notorious criminal.

Hedvig had slipped out as silently as a mouse. Her small face with its dark, hungry eyes was pale. Peter leaned sulkily in an awkward posture against the doorpost. It is not to be supposed that the presence of the child disturbed Kristin in the very least. She just went on. She was talking now about the old pensioned couple down by the Hökar meadow: You see the master, Old Hök, made up his mind to starve out such encumbrances of estate. They only got some thin whey and a little that the miller swept up from the floor. But it is still how little an old woman can live on. So the old man had to turn to vermin. He put a sofa into old Kerstin's cottage that was alive all over. But Kerstin thought I must die, I shall at least die on his front step"—so on a winter morning she trailed herself up to his house and had to take off her rags before the front door. And you can imagine she was not beautiful, because she had smeared tar over her whole body as a protection against lice. I

so awful that even Old Hök had to hurry to his cupboard and take a drop of something strong.

Here Kristin stopped suddenly and caught hold of Hedvig's hand as it lay anxiously clenched in her lap. Yes, indeed, it clenched a sticky lump of sugar. The temptation had proved too strong as she stole through the empty kitchen. Kristin's tone now became still more sinister and solemn: "Well, well, that's what heredity does," she mumbled. "Keep your fingers out of the sugar jar. Hedvig, otherwise the sugar knife will fall and cut off your hand. Or maybe the Bogey Man will come and take you."

Hedvig turned quite white. A spasm passed over her face—but she did not cry. She cowered and went on listening to Kristin, who continued in her sombre manner: "Yes, as I always say, everything goes wrong here at Selambshof both with human beings and with animals, since the old master drove away the good house spirits. And there are strange things both in the forest and in the lake. Would any of you like to be alone at nighttime in Enoch's cave? And don't bubbles rise even to-day by the big stone beyond the reeds? The old master said that Matts fell in whilst he was trying to catch hold of an oar that he had lost. But I know what I know. They didn't find Matts. But afterwards Old Hök always dropped his hooks just at that spot and caught lots of eels and beat the young master because he wouldn't eat them. Yes, he was like that. And he has not gone from this place yet. Tell me, Anders, don't the horses still jib down there by the grey stone at the corner of the avenue? They have done so ever since Old Hök died there. He sat quite straight with his hands on the knob of his stick and frowned, though he was stone dead. They had to bring four men to straighten him out and lay him in his coffin, so obstinate was he even after death. But he left lots of money."

At this point, old Kristin lowered her voice and became humble in spite of herself. That was, of course, the people's admiration for wealth. It was the unconditional surrender of the old peasant woman to the fact of possession. And both Anders and the maid, who had been peacefully dozing during this recital of well-known horrors, now leant forward with listening eyes as Kristin sat there and spun out her story of all the gold in the chest and all the corn in the barns:

"Yes, he did look after the farm, did the old master.* In those days there was something like a manure heap for a cock to stand on and crow. And nobody dared to steal even a potato then. Do you hear that, Anders? No, those were different days—for now you do nothing but idle about and steal. Well, I suppose everything will lie waste soon. Yes, yes, we have not seen the end yet—we have not seen the end. And there are lots of children to share it too—and more are coming. It is a real pity. Poor Peter, who is the eldest and will inherit it. Poor Peter, that's what I say! Are you loafing about there with your hands in your pockets again? Take your hands out of your pockets—otherwise you will lose both house and land. You wait and see if I don't speak the truth. And don't climb on the rail and wear out your stockings."

Kristin had come to this point when they heard a scream from the bedroom upstairs. The silence beneath the bare elms was suddenly and harshly torn asunder. Perhaps it sounded to Peter and Hedvig like one of those strange, petrified screeches which sometimes fill the grown-ups' sleep with horror.

The little group dissolved instantly. The maid ran in for the kettles in the kitchen. Anders strolled hesitatingly towards the lake, and Kristin pushed the children into the dining-room and turned the key. Peter and Hedvig were locked in with Old Hök, whose portrait hung there in the twilight over the leather-covered sofa. They were standing in the middle of the room and dared not look at the picture. They were expecting another scream that would make their hair stand on end again. They supposed it must come since they had been driven in here. But they heard no scream—for many long, long minutes all was still. By and by their eyes were irresistibly drawn to Old Hök. There he stood in a long, black coat. And his nose looked like a bird's beak, and his fingers were clenched round his stick handle and looked like claws. But worst of all were his eyes, for wherever you stood they stared straight down at you, so that you felt that your blood ran cold. It had, of course, been horrid to listen to Kristin, but then that was, as it were, only half ghostly, and there was mixed with it a curiously pleasant sensation as when you step into a pool and the cool water oozes into your stockings. But this!

Oh, this was ever so much worse! Their childish fear, awakened out of its semi-sleep, now fluttered wildly round Old Høk—and Kristin's superstition and her prophecies of woe hovered over them in new and terrifying shapes.

Peter was perhaps not so sensitive to the more remote horrors. His fears fastened on what was nearest to hand. Truly small as he was, he stood there staring at the grey and tattered ghost of poverty. His anxiety was centred on a big signet ring that Old Høk was wearing on his first finger. He wore it, of course, because he was so awfully rich. But where was the ring now? Old Høk's eyes pursued him with the question: Where is my ring now? Peter knew nothing of it. His father had not worn it, and it was not in his mother's jewel-box. Supposing Anders had stolen it! Or fat Lotten in the kitchen? Fancy if they should steal everything at Selambshof, so that he, Peter, had to sit without any clothes in the forest and starve and shiver. Fancy if that was why Mamma lay up there and screamed so terribly. Yes, he knew it was Mamma who had screamed.

That was Peter's fear. But Hedvig's fear was different, deeper, vaguer. She was afraid of the Bogey Man that Kristin frightened her with. And now he had suddenly assumed Old Høk's features. Yes, the Bogey Man was there in the room, just in front of her. But it never occurred to her to take Peter's hand. Hedvig was not like that. She was alone from the beginning, alone in her fear and helpless with that complete and profound helplessness that grown-ups only experience in the dangers and horrors of a nightmare.

And now they heard another scream, fainter but just as dreadful. It came from all sides at once—from the stairs, from the door, from the walls themselves. Hedvig suddenly understood—the Bogey Man had come! He was taking somebody as he passed on his way. Because it was of course herself, Hedvig, that he really wanted. She shrank and closed her eyes. Then she looked up again, just for a second. He was no longer there above the sofa. He had climbed down—he was coming towards her! He was stretching out his claws!

Hedvig dug her nails into the edge of the table and screamed, screamed wildly. It was not to be borne. Peter also started screaming. He saw himself standing starving

and naked in a big dark forest full of wolves. It is not to be wondered at, then, that they screamed. But that was not all. The younger children, who slept in the adjoining room, wakened in a fright and started to scream too. So the whole chorus of children's voices joined with the mother's groans above.

Kristin suddenly appeared in the door with a candle. "Good gracious—you dreadful children to make such a noise when the mistress is ill!"

She packed Peter and Hedvig into the green room. Oh, what a wonderful, pleasant relief it was to feel Kristin's bony hands in your back. They undressed with feverish haste, afraid lest she should go before they had had time to pull the bedclothes over their heads.

"Dearest Kristin, please leave the light burning."

"Nonsense; go to sleep now."

And the light was gone.

They lay huddled up in the terrible darkness like two poor little orphans. Fear kept them long awake and pursued them even in their dreams, when at last they had fallen asleep. The night of the earth is but a passing shadow, but the night fear in the heart is evil and long. And for many it seems as if there would be no morning.

The following day the children at Selambshof lost their mother. Both she and the newborn baby died before their father reached home. He had been kept late during a shoot at Kolsnäs.

'THE ROBBERS' STRONGHOLD

THE children were playing up in the big attic at Selambshof. The rain pattered against the tiles of the roof and rushed down the spouts. But inside it was dry and dusty and mysterious in the twilight among the roof-timbers and the chimney pipes. And there were heaps of things that the grown-ups had thrown aside, but which for that very reason were so tempting: old, worn-out things which had reached their second childhood, and just for that reason suited the children's games so well.

It was only with great difficulty that Stellan could open the lock of the iron-bound oak chest. Triumphant, he pulled out a torn black skirt and spread it over the pram in which Hedvig lay on her back, pale and with her legs hanging over the edge. He called to Peter, who was the hearse-horse, and the melancholy procession was just about to start when Hedvig began to sneeze because the skirt was full of red pepper.

"Can't you pretend to be dead, you silly girl?" shouted Stellan impatiently.

And Laura bent down and giggled in the midst of the procession. Besides these two, the mourners were Herman Hermansson from Ekbacken and little Tord. But Tord did not want to take part in the game any longer, so he crept into a corner and sulked. The outlook was not very promising.

Creakily the pram began to move. They were playing "Mamma's funeral" for the hundredth time.

The procession stopped before the church, which was the triangle under the staircase up to the ceiling. Herman, with an air of deadly earnest on his open face, stood and chimed a nail on a stove ring. But Stellan drew the black skirt over his shoulders and climbed up on a wooden box

and pretended to be the clergyman. He threw his head back and, laying his hands on his chest, began to hold forth. "From the earth you come, and wipe your feet, and honour your father and mother and sister and brother, and don't hang on to people's skirts, and don't balance yourself on your chair because you will fall, fallevall, appala, mesala, mesinka, meso, sebedi, sebedo, and get away now, you silly, for now you are dead."

This long rigmarole was uttered with the utmost solemnity and did not fail to impress the listeners. Hedvig grew frightened of shamming dead. She was so frightened that she felt cold shivers down her back. But she did not climb out of the coffin; she remained as quiet as a mouse, for she knew that if she gave up the place of honour Laura would seize it at once. And Hedvig did not want that on any account.

Suddenly the rain stopped pattering on the roof. Silently the shadows crept on in the dust under the heavy beams. It was as if the silence and the emptiness of the big, gloomy house had stealthily crept up among these mourners. They really felt the emptiness after their mother's death, after her dainties and her scolding—perhaps most after her scolding. Yes, formerly when Mamma was in the kitchen scolding they heard it up in the attic. But with old Kristin it was different. She kept on worrying them the whole time—and they got tired of it.

And then there was something funny about Father. Since Mamma died he was always in town, and when sometimes he came home he looked so dull-eyed and shabby, almost as if he was drunk. And then they felt still lonelier. Stellan had overheard Kristin say to the gardener that the master was drinking himself to death—but Stellan could not understand how that could happen. Surely one did not die from being drunk?

Alas, how gloomy and empty it was up there in the big attic! Herman began to long for his home at Ekbacken, where it was not at all strange as it was here.

But the Selamb children felt they must fight against the silence with shouts and noise and quarrelling.

"Let us play drunkards," shouted Peter, and began to slouch and reel and push the others about in his clumsy way.

But Stellan knew better. Both Peter and Herman

were stronger than Stellan, but all the same it was usually he who was leader. If a lot of dogs play about on a lawn you will in nine cases out of ten find that there is a small one taking the lead in the game.

"No; let us get out on the roof and play robbers," he shouted.

With the help of Peter and Herman he managed to open the big trap door, and they tumbled out on the roof, which sloped gently and had strong iron bars between the battlements. Selambshof was an old manor house which had been rebuilt, during a period of bad taste, in the gloomy style of a fortress castle, with narrow windows, towers, gables, and battlements.

They were on forbidden ground. Hedvig stopped half inside and half outside the trap—she was like that. "Take care, you people on the roof," she whimpered repeatedly to the others, but they took no notice of her.

It was awfully cold up there. And it gave you a queer feeling in the pit of the stomach to be so high over the wet, glistening tops of the trees in the park. And she had never seen such a big black cloud as the one which was just passing over the town. Beneath was the black smoke, and through the smoke the windows flashed like a shot. But opposite the sky was as green as ice, except in the farthest distance over the dark and ragged edge of the forest, where it was yellow. And the lake looked like a piece of the mirror of the sky which had fallen down among the trees. It was quite unbroken except between Kolsnäs and Stonehill, where the steamer was passing and shattered it.

Stellan was the first to reach the railing. Oh, how cold he felt about the forehead. But giddiness changed to recklessness—wild shouting recklessness. How small everything down there looked! Just look at Anders at the corner of the stable! Wasn't he a mere spot? And Kristin—what did he care about Kristin? No, now they would have some fun!

"Selambshof is a robbers' stronghold!" he shouted—quite pale with excitement. "We are wild highwaymen! We care for nothing—we just kill and take what we want!"

This seemed to appeal to Peter. He took aim at Ekbacken and pulled the trigger—that is to say, he levelled his finger and said: "Bang, I shot Ekbacken! Ekbacken is mine."

Herman protested: "No—Ekbacken belongs to my father."

He was severely snubbed: "Blockhead! Are we robbers or are we not?"

And then Stellan mercilessly shot to pieces Kolsnäs, the white walls of which peeped out behind the trees on the other side of the lake. Peter reloaded and took aim and shot at Trefvinge, which was the finest place within sight—a real big castle with four copper towers far away beyond the edge of the forest. Things were now getting exciting, for Peter and Stellan and Herman were all aiming at the town itself with all its church towers and chimneys! *Bang, bang, bang!*—the shots were fired almost simultaneously.

"The town is mine," cried Herman. "I shot first."

"No, I shot first," lied Peter confidently.

"No, mine was the only one that hit," cried Stellan, stamping on the roof. "Now both Kolsnäs and the town are mine."

"That's not fair," insisted Herman; "I ought to have something, and I shot first."

"That's a lie," insisted Peter quietly but menacingly.

Stellan was already furious. "Whose idea was it that we should play robbers—eh? I am the chief of the robbers. And now I have taken the town and am king of the castle."

But Herman would not give way, as he knew that his was the first shot.

"It's not fair. It's beastly unfair. I won't play robbers with you if you are unfair."

It looked like a fight.

Laura had been watching with her teeth chattering, and trying to hide her little fat fingers in the sleeves of her frock. Now she jumped excitedly down towards the infuriated robbers. Unobserved, even Hedvig left her spy-hole in the trap.

Stellan and Herman had already come to grips, and scratched and tore at each other in the artless way of children. At last they began to wrestle, and Stellan, who was the shorter of the two, was underneath.

"You see that I did shoot first," panted Herman.

Then Peter with his cool cheek intervened. He rolled round this human knot and extricated Stellan, who, rather shamefaced at his defeat, withdrew with feigned contempt

from the robber band. Then Peter sat down astride of Herman.

• "Now say that the town is mine."

• "No."

He began to jump on Herman. This hurt Herman, because he was lying athwart the ridge of the roof.

"Say that it is mine!"

• "No."

Peter jumped on him more than ever.

"Is it mine, what?"

Herman did not cry out. But he hit out wildly, and at last, maddened by pain, he bit Peter's hand. Peter at once uttered a wild scream. Then Herman let go. But Peter was wise and screamed after the pain was gone.

"Take care, you who bite," piped Hedvig in her thin voice.

Herman suddenly became horrified at his wicked deed.

"Dear Peter, please forgive me," he begged.

"Was it I who took the town, then?" hissed Peter.

"Yes, I suppose it was."

Peter felt better at once, but it suddenly struck him that his victory was not worth much, and so he began to moan and cry again: "Oh, oh, oh!"

Herman was again alarmed and stricken with remorse. "Dear Peter, don't cry. Please forgive me, Peter, dear."

"Will you give me your glass marble, then?" whimpered Peter pitifully.

Herman pulled the glass marble out of his bag with a sigh and gave it to Peter. So at last Peter had gained something real from his robber's career. He stood smiling to himself, and weighed the five heavy marbles in his right hand—but did not trouble to wipe off the blood from his left hand. It might always be useful to leave it there.

During this scene little Tord had also clambered out on to the roof. But he took no notice of the cries and noise of the others. He sat aside and leant over an old green box where nasturtiums had once grown, but which was now half-filled with rain-water. Something moved in the depths. Strange little creatures with only heads and tails teemed in it. And they rose to the surface with little jerks and then disappeared again in the black-brown depths. Oh, how wonderfully mysterious it all was! He drew himself up

silently. He cast anxious side-glances at the fight which was going on. Soon they would probably come and kick over the whole of his wondrous find. He hated his big brothers and sisters, who never let him enjoy anything in peace.

A voice was heard from the stairs, and he crept behind the chimney.

It was Kristin. She emerged from the trap door like an old witch ready for a ride on her broom. She shook her fist, which was covered with gouty lumps, but nevertheless still had a grip of iron.

"Were there ever such heathen children? You will break your necks and be good for nothing—that's what will happen to you. Come down at once from the roof."

The children slouched back to the trap door. Each one of them felt Kristin's fingers in his hair. Peter approached cautiously and hunched up, holding his wounded hand like a shield in front of him. Kristin caught sight of it.

"What have you been doing, you naughty boy?"

Peter did not tell any tales himself, but he looked beseechingly at Hedvig. He knew that she could not resist.

"It was Herman," she panted. "He bit Peter until the blood ran. I only went out on the roof to see who was crying."

In this way both Peter and Hedvig escaped a hair-pulling, and that was exactly what they had hoped for.

But Herman got a double dose, and went home with bitterness in his heart.

Not until the other children were in their beds was Tord missed. It was not at all unusual for him to be lost like that. They looked for him in the usual places: the empty dog-kennel, the wood shed, the hollow oak by the stable. But without success. At last Hedvig remembered that he had been with them on the roof, and there they found him huddled up on the cold tiles, leaning against the box with the wonderful mosquito larvæ and wet with dew. He was sleeping with his dirty little thumb in his mouth.

Soon everything was silent in the big house. And one of the frosty "iron" nights of June fell with its devastation upon the neglected garden and fields of Selambshof.

THE DANCE OF THE CROW-INDIANS

IT was a fine, warm, summer afternoon, when the mosquito swarms hovered like high pillars of smok in the avenue of Selambshof.

But in the garden on the north side of the house Oskar Selamb was sitting in his usual seat. He was sitting just where the mosses of the walls hung most heavily over the grey stone base and where the damp shade beneath the old elm tree seemed full of evil memories. His big straw hat was pushed far back on his head, and his purple, trembling hands were clasped round the handle of his walking-stick. His beard grew like a weed round his weak, half-open mouth, and he stared in front of him with a lifeless, taciturn gloom that had little human left in it.

A friend of former days would scarcely have recognised him.

How had Oskar Selamb, owner of Selambshof, father of five young children, and not much past fifty, come to such a pass? The immediate cause was probably the death of his wife, but in order really to understand this tragedy one must go back to the tyranny of old Enoch. It was he who had broken his son's spirit. Up to his thirtieth year Oskar had been little more than a sort of superior farm labourer on the estate, without any rights, without a will of his own, reviled and ill-treated by Old Hök, who kept his claws and his beak sharp till the end. It leaves a mark on a man to have his hopes in life picked piece by piece out of his breast by a father who feeds his own strong flame of life by doing so. When the hour of deliverance struck at last, Oskar Selamb had come to hate his inheritance. Yes, he hated this place of humiliation, for ever haunted by the old man's shadow. But he had not strength to throw it all off and begin afresh. He merely absented himself as much as

possible and let the estate go to ruin. And late in life he married a servant-girl, whom he had raised to the rank of housekeeper at Selambshof. His friends were not surprised by this misalliance. Even during the days of his humiliation he had been fond of the girl, for which reason, of course, she had at once been shown the door. And when Oskar afterwards by chance caught sight of her behind a bar, he took her into his house and married her—out of pure spite, as people said, in order to make old Enoch turn in his grave. To tell the truth, he was not in love with her. It was rather the spasmodic effort of a weak and vacillating man to kick away the past. His wife was a small, dark, thin woman with a pointed nose, and moderately capable and energetic within her domain. Her voice penetrated shrill and alert through the fumes of the kitchen or the washtub. She remained a bad-tempered but capable servant of her husband and, later, of the children. But for her the home would not have held together as well as it did, for Oskar Selamb became more and more incapable of looking after anything. And he still spent most of his time in the town. There he sat among his fellow-topers, lost at whist, and in business; cursed and harangued between his draughts of steaming toddy, as weak people do, on the evils of the times. Meanwhile Selambshof decayed, Ryssvik was lost, the forest melted away, and the mortgages became heavier and heavier. His wife bore him in quick succession, and with eternal lamentations, five hungry and crying children. With the sixth she succumbed herself. When her husband came driving home that autumn morning she already lay dead in the big double bed.

Oskar Selamb had never loved his wife. He had neglected her, treated her brutally, and worn her out. But all the same her death gave him the finishing blow. It was her scolding that had kept him going. Now he sank irrevocably. His journeys to town grew more frequent than ever. Meaner and meaner grew the bars outside which his shabby old coach had to wait till late into the night. He could not even keep himself decent. Old friends avoided him, whilst discussing with interest whether it was from joy of getting rid of his wife or from grief at losing her that he was drinking himself to death.

The more subtle held that it was a combination of these

two feelings. The only one who tried to do something for his friend Oskar was his neighbour and companion from childhood, William Hermansson, owner of the Ekbacken sawmill and shipyard. As it happened, the Ekbacken establishment was situated just by the main road into town, and when, nowadays, William saw Oskar's dreary-looking coach, he stepped out on to his front doorstep and admonished his old friend in carefully chosen words. He tried in every way to tempt him to decent intercourse in his respectable and comfortable widower's home, reminding him of the times when he had found a refuge there from old Enoch's tyranny. But Oskar always drove past with some vague pretext of important meetings and urgent business.

Within a few months the crash came. Oskar Selamb was brought home a pitiful wreck after having had a stroke at a miserable little inn in the slums. After several months he got up from his sickbed, bloated, with unsteady hands, and no memory, scarcely a human being any more. But still there was no sign that death would mercifully do its work. After solemn lamentations, the owner of Ekbacken agreed to become the guardian of the children, and through his efforts a new bailiff, named John Brundin, was appointed.

That is how things had been for more than two years at Selambshof. Thus on the still summer evening we have described, Oskar Selamb sat on his usual seat beneath the old elm. He sat there so motionless that the sparrows hopped about in front of him on the round stone slab superposed on an enormous oak stump which did duty as a table. But out there in the slanting golden rays of the sun, round the wing where the bailiff lived, shimmered clouds of gnats and fine spiders' webs.

Stellan and Laura were playing in the sand and in the lilac hedge in front of the house. The simple games of robbers of former days were now a thing of the past. They wore a bright array of feathers, and carried bows and tomahawks. They had read Cooper and Marryat and knew how to choose impressive names and make subtle stratagems. The hedge was also dense and deep, with fine ambushes and splendid hiding-places for stealthy Indian warfare. Stellan was called "Black Panther" and Laura "Flying Arrow." Don't imagine that she was allowed to impersonate some pale squaw with a soft flower name. No; she was a young

warrior on her first warpath. "Black Panther's" voice sounded sharp and commanding when he was teaching his young companion the use of the bow. "Flying Arrow" had displayed some squeamishness and had giggled in an unwarriorlike manner, which was not in keeping with the seriousness of the moment, and which was duly corrected.

Peter was looking on. Big and clumsy in his outgrown and patched sailor's suit, he leant against a rusty rainpipe grinning provocatively. "Black Panther" ran up to him.

"Won't you come and play with us and be a Pale-Face?"

"No," came Peter's sulky reply in a husky voice about to break.

"Black Panther" looked round about him, wondering how to get some new excitement into the game, as it was beginning to become dull. His glance fell with a sudden expression of premature and hopeless loathing on his father on the seat. But just as suddenly he brightened up—caught hold of "Flying Arrow" by the arm and pointed at the old man.

"He is a Comanche. He is 'Heavy Ox.' We'll creep up to him from two sides."

"Black Panther" and "Flying Arrow" crept across the plot of sand with sly, watchful eyes. Then "Black Panther" sprang up like a steel spring released and swung his lasso. "Heavy Ox" was caught. They tied him to the seat as to a torture post. "Heavy Ox" did not seem to notice anything. From behind "Black Panther" even managed to put on his head a chieftain's feather crown consisting of some crow's feathers pushed into the ribbon of an old, brimless, tattered straw hat. But "Heavy Ox" sat there with his new and wonderful ornament as solemnly and as apathetically unconcerned as ever.

Shrill laughter from "Flying Arrow" greeted this ridiculous apparition.

Then they began to dance round their victim. Swinging their tomahawks and their bows, they danced to the accompaniment of wild cries of excitement.

"'Heavy Ox' can't get free! 'Heavy Ox' is fat and stupid! 'Heavy Ox' shall die! 'Heavy Ox' is fat and stupid!"

This sudden wild joy quite surprised the Crow-Indians

themselves. They perhaps did not know that there was vengeance in this game. And how much had they not to avenge! How well they might have called out to "Heavy Ox": "That is for the hundreds of meals that were made disgusting by your nasty snuffling! That's for your horrid snuffle and for your dull eyes that don't see us! That's for the neglect, the ruin, the incurable wounds to our tender beings! That's for the great musty hole in which we spend our childhood."

Tired of dancing they sat down to smoke a calumet, whilst still deriding and challenging their bound enemy.

"Heavy Ox" had taken no more notice of his tormentors than of the flies that buzzed around him. But now he showed signs of restlessness. And his restlessness was always of the same kind.

"Is it time for supper soon?" he stammered.

Then they jumped up again and began to dance with renewal of their wild exultation.

"'Heavy Ox' shan't get any food! 'Heavy Ox' is fat and stupid! 'Heavy Ox' shall die! 'Heavy Ox' is fat and stupid!"

Peter was still leaning against the rainpipe. He followed the game with a half-troubled, half-pleased grin. "They will catch it for this," he thought. "I have not taken part in it. I have been standing here the whole time by the rainpipe and have not taken any part in it."

Then Peter saw Mr. Brundin thrust his head out of a window. It was beginning to get exciting. The punishment for these reckless children was drawing nearer. But Peter was at once disillusioned. Brundin only laughed and puffed at a big cigar. And Peter made a note in his memory that Brundin only grinned at forbidden and dangerous things.

Then at last something happened. Old Hermansson came walking up the avenue. And instantly Brundin's head disappeared from the window. But "Black Panther" and "Flying Arrow" noticed nothing. Old Hermansson walked quietly across the sand plot. He was as straight backed as if he had been drawn on a slate by a good boy. He walked with his coat buttoned high up to the throat, his head erect, and his hands behind his back. He walked with measured dignity, and each step seemed to be an ad-

monition to the careless, the irreverent, and the reckless. One can scarcely imagine anything more typical to children of the grown-up.

Peter stood still with excitement and bit his nails. *This was really a great moment.*

Then Mr. Brundin came rushing out of the door. He had put aside the big cigar and hastened with every mark of respect to free "Heavy Ox" from his bonds, whilst with serious and angry mien he shook his fist at the two Indians.

This was something more for Peter to note: a moment ago Brundin had only grinned, and now he became serious when old Hermansson was present.

At last old Hermansson arrived. Now at last somebody would be cuffed. But Peter had to wait. Old Hermansson first saw that the unsuitable ornament was removed from his old friend's head. Then he greeted him, obstinately maintaining the habit of speech of past and happier days.

"How do you do, how do you do, my dear Oskar? I hope you are well. Yes, it is a fine day to-day, a very fine day. So I thought I would take a little walk in order to talk to our good bailiff about the rye-crop."

Oskar Selamb had recovered his greasy old hat again. But he was clearly completely insensible to these see-saws of exultation and degradation. He stared sulkily in front of him and grunted:

"I want my supper—can't I have my supper?"

"In due time, my dear Oskar. In due time you will certainly have your supper."

Now it seemed to be Stellan's and Laura's turn. Their guardian placed himself in front of them and made a little speech:

"Listen carefully now, my children," he said. "I don't want to see you show your father such disrespect again. 'Honour thy father and mother that thy days may be long in the land and that it may go well with you.'"

Here he shook his head solemnly and let the culprits go. And the fair and plump little Laura danced away with small sidesteps like a puppy, but not before she had cast a coquettish and triumphant glance at Peter in passing, as if to say, "Cheated! There was no thrashing!"

But Stellan stood there with all his warlike array in his

hand, and with an air of disillusionment looked at "Heavy Ox," who was no longer "Heavy Ox," but only the familiar dismal figure. Then he lightly shrugged his shoulders and quietly went away whistling among the currant bushes. With his quick, cold eyes and his proud mouth he did not exactly look like one of those who fare badly in this world.

It may be that old Hermansson was also somewhat mistaken. It may be that callousness developed early in life may be one of the conditions of success in this world. It may be that daily and hourly contact with degraded humanity simply hardens a little Indian's heart for life's cruel warfare.

IV

PETER THE WATCH-DOG

PETER'S school report at the end of the term was, as usual, not good, and he was not moved up. Now he sat in the billiard-room on the third floor grinding away in the summer holidays.

Peter sat drawing his fingers through his rough hair and bent over his book. We all know that struggle against an incurable lack of concentration, the bending very closely over an unfortunate text until the letters begin to swell and jostle each other out of line and shamelessly vanish in the blue.

Peter lifted his head, puffing as if he had been under water and could no longer hold his breath. But it was not only the common, boyish instinct to throw all to the winds and rush out to the day's adventures in forest and field. It was not only the healthy restlessness of a growing boy that was reflected in his face. He turned and twisted on his chair and looked about him, and secretly cast stealthy side-glances from beneath his unkempt shock of hair, as if fearing that somebody stood behind him listening to his thoughts.

Not even when he was alone could he look anything straight in the face.

Now he jumped up and took a turn round the old billiard-table covered by an old torn dust-sheet. All round him in the dilapidated room the torn wallpaper was curling and the dry paint was peeling off the skirting boards and window-frames. Peter stopped a moment in front of a blackboard that had once been the billiard marker, but which was now covered with his unsolved algebra problems. He made a weak effort, but then he flung away the chalk as if it had burnt his fingers, and rushed suddenly to the window and peeped out.

Since Old Hök's time the billiard-room had been generally

called the observatory. Its high, narrow, fortress-like windows faced three ways, and from this high point one could look out over the whole of the Selamb estate. On a stand made of three worn-out cues stood a long, battered, leather-covered telescope. It was here that Peter's grandfather used to sit and spy on his people in order mercilessly to swoop down on the idle or the dishonest. You could still see his old focus marks on the brass tube of the telescope, and they had crept farther and farther out as he grew older and more shortsighted.

If anybody had seen Peter by the window overlooking the terrace he would have thought that Old Høk was not yet quite dead.

The bailiff was going to have a crayfish party for some friends from the town. He was standing down there hanging up Chinese lanterns. Frida, the new maid, was handing them to him out of a big clothes-basket.

Peter found it impossible to remain any longer at his work. Silently as a mouse he stole out into the garden. He did not make straight for the terrace, but walked with long, searching side-glances till at last he settled on an observation post in the dense lilac hedge. Then he pretended to be carving a stick, but all the time he kept his eyes on the little lantern-scene. Brundin was standing in his shirt-sleeves with a long cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth, so as not to get the smoke in his eyes. He was a fair man with small, light, curly moustaches. He was wearing a check waistcoat, riding-breeches, and top-boots. But even if he did not look like the Fairy Prince himself, he might at least have passed for one of the members of his suite. For the moment he was carrying on with Frida, who made eyes and giggled as if he had tickled her.

Peter sat and fidgeted. There were a lot of questions that tormented him like insects. That Brundin fellow had no farm, so how could he be so awfully smart with his check waistcoat and heavy gold chain stretched across his vest? And his tie-pin was as big as a penny! And where had he got all those splendid lanterns? And why should Frida stand there and dance attendance on him and hand him the lanterns?

All Peter's brooding and discontent found expression in that one question: Why should our Frida stand there and

hand lanterns to Brundin? And he had to gulp it down time after time lest it should escape his lips in a loud growl.

No, he could not bear to look any longer.

With his eyes on the ground and his big hands hanging awkwardly by his sides Peter strolled round the yard and out into the fields. He lumbered about like a watch-dog sniffing reflectively at every corner. Everywhere he scented decay. From his own father, who sat there heedless and inert on his bench by the front door, and who in the depth of his decay had no thought for anything else but his next meal, this ruin spread itself over garden, barn, stable, and granary—and out over fields, meadows, and forest. There were a thousand things that whispered of it, the weeds in the paths, the broken glass of the cucumber frames, the broken-down, moss-covered fences, bottomless patches of road, bare, neglected forest slopes. There were a thousand things Peter would have liked to ask Brundin about, but when he met him smart and resplendent with a big cigar in the corner of his mouth, then a kind of paralysis of fear overtook him. Not with red-hot tongs could one have dragged a straightforward, direct question out of the boy—and that even though the bailiff had never uttered a harsh word to him, but, on the contrary, had cracked a good-natured joke with him, and had several times offered him good things from town, which Peter had grabbed clumsily and carried off like a dog which is afraid of a thrashing.

The labourers on the estate were the only ones with whom Peter could talk on the subject. Obeying the instinct of a sort of subordinate, the future heir pried about for signs of discontent, for hints and suggestions. But he had little success. It was of importance that he should be very careful. He turned his questions over and over again in his mind before they passed his lips. In his timidity and excess of carefulness he began to beat about the bush so much that often he never reached his point at all. Those who asked for nothing better than to speak the truth about the bailiff did not understand what he was driving at. And cleverer ones and those with a bad conscience saw through him in their own way, and thought it best to beware of this sneaking, spying nuisance of a boy, and not to criticise those in authority.

Down in the bend of the avenue Peter met Anders, who was driving home with a load of rye from the Hökar meadow.

The boy climbed up in the rye beside the old stable-hand, but he did not think how jolly it was to lie softly like this among the sheaves glowing with cornflowers, and to swing gently along in the half-light under the old elms. To-day his restlessness was worse than ever, and he grew quite bold of speech.

"How much is a load like this worth, Anders?"

"Oh, it's worth a good deal of money. And it would fetch more if it wasn't for the weeds."

"Who takes care of the money?"

"The bailiff, of course."

"But, Anders, when they pay him the money, how can he know what is ours and what is his?"

"Well, Master Peter, the bailiff keeps his books."

"But supposing somebody went and wrote something wrong in his books?"

"No, they can't, for he keeps his books locked up, you see."

"But supposing he should forget to write something in the books?"

Peter's tone was one of entreaty, but Anders was impossible.

"It is his chief work, to write down everything in the books," he muttered, with a side-glance.

Thus Peter helped to drive in the rye. They had reached the barn now, and he jumped down no wiser than before. The cracked old gong rang for dinner, and it sounded like a funeral bell.

The dining-room smelt of "sluring," a soup which was the abomination of all the children. They pushed the chairs about, kicked each other's legs, and quarrelled because nobody wanted to sit next to father, who was horrid at table. They were just like a lot of crows on a branch at nighttime, pecking at each other because none wants to sit farthest out on the branch, in the darkness and emptiness. Finally Tord was pushed there; he was the smallest and weakest. Frida flung down the soup. It was worse than ever. There had probably been no time for cooking because of the preparations for the evening party. Peter shrank and held his hands to his ears so as not to hear his father eating his soup. There came a queer smell from the neighbourhood of Tord, who did not touch his food, but pulled out a dirty

handkerchief full of snakes' eggs which he had found in the manure heap. Stellan waited upon his father. When he had lapped up his soup, the young man was there in a flash with his own full plate, the contents of which disappeared just as quickly. Laura's plate went the same way. Those two always adopted the same strategy. But Peter and Hedvig did their duty. There were bread fritters to follow. Old Kristin came in. Nowadays there was not much left of her. Usually she sat in her little room mumbling to herself as she knitted. But she still retained her power over Tord, so he had to sit there with his soup. He could be shut up with his plate for ever so long without uttering a sound. He was a strange, silent child, Tord.

Still hungry and out of humour, Peter crept down into the garden and stole whatever he could find to eat there.

Then the steamer arrived with Brundin's guests. There were corn dealers, greengrocers, and butchers from the town, nothing but rogues that he did business with. They at once sat down to smoke and drink punch at a long table on the terrace. From the beginning there were heard shouts of coarse, bass voices and roars of laughter, and it was clear that they had laid a solid foundation for their merriment in some inn in town. Frida, fresh and not at all shy in spite of her seventeen years, flitted about the whole time bearing trays frequently replenished, and was vigorously pinched, tickled, and caressed. But in the midst of all shone Brundin in his check waistcoat, and whenever you looked at him he sat with glass uplifted and "Your health" on his lips.

Peter hovered about, gloomy and unnoticed, on the fringe of this festive party. He loitered about the bedroom window, he crept into the lilac hedge. In the end he secured himself up among the branches of the big maple tree below the signal-guns on the terrace. From there he saw them light the gay-coloured lanterns and bring in the enormous dishes of crayfish with their fennel crowns to the accompaniment of wild shouts of welcome. The lanterns swung to and fro, and the candles in the big candlesticks from off the sideboard flickered and flamed as if intoxicated, and cast a shimmering light on serviettes tied round fat necks, on rolled-up shirt sleeves and rows of sparkling glasses simultaneously raised.

To crown all, Peter saw how Stellan and Laura, who had been leaping round with eager and unrestrained curiosity amongst the merry guests, were called by the bailiff, and how each was given a big portion of crayfish to eat at the table. Breathlessly Peter held fast to his branch and communed with the whispering gloom of the great dark tree-top.

Then an old fellow rose and thanked the host. He fumbled with his wineglass and now and then squeezed out a word, just as if he had been on the point of suffocation before he got it out. And his shadow, ragged and giantlike, mounted the loosening plaster of the walls of Selambshof.

"Kalle Brundin!" he shouted; "Kalle Brundin! All here present join with me! And what do we join in? We join in the belief that this has been a damned fine party. Damned jolly to see you out here in your old Selambshof! Thank you, Kalle Brundin! A fourfold hurrah for Kalle Brundin and his Selambshof! May he live long! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

In reply Kalle Brundin pointed with an elegant gesture to the landing-stage and the steamer. And instantly the whole company stumbled towards it so that the table was deserted.

Sssh! Bang! there went the first rocket. And then came cracking grasshoppers and divers that fizzled and spluttered in the water, and golden rains that vomited sparks round the gate-posts, and bright Roman candles, and then rockets again and crackers and starlights.

Peter slipped down out of the tree. This was too much. He shrank as if the sparks had rained in his eyes. What was it that sparkled and cracked but Brundin's arrogance. This abominable Brundin filled the skies with his violent, sneering, exultant pride.

But amidst the smell of powder there came some odours from the table, and then it struck Peter that Brundin for the moment was not guarding his interests on the terrace. In a trice Peter was there. Like a frightened, thieving dog he gulped down pieces of meat, cake, and whatever was left in the wineglasses. He had not time to taste anything properly and half choked himself, but somehow it did him good all the same. It was as if he had stolen back a little of his own, and with a somewhat easier mind he slunk away into the darkness again.

The fireworks were over and the guests stumbled back to their punch-glasses again. But now it seemed as if the last remnants of their dignity had vanished with the rockets. Some fell down on the chairs as if their legs had been struck off beneath them. And some stood with their arms round each other's necks, panting, as if they would drown each other in friendship. And others were quarrelling with raised voices that were lost among the shy shadows of the still August night. But Brundin sat there unperturbed and contented in the midst of the noise; like the devil at a horsefair, smiling with half-closed eyes and puffing at his cigar.

Then Peter heard somebody come stamping out on the kitchen stairs where he was sitting. It was old Kristin. In the light of the lanterns, which now caught fire and flared up one after the other, she raised her trembling, bony arms like two withered branches. And she muttered a long string of reproaches and threats against the impious bailiff and his inhuman company. When she caught sight of Peter her voice, which seemed to have been worn down to a pale, feeble thread by all the unhappiness and misery of this world, broke, and putting her cold, withered hand on his head, she said, "You poor orphan children! We all know what happens to them. You will never grow up to sit at Selambshof. No! No!"

Thereupon old Kristin stumped in again. But Peter felt the chill of that withered, trembling hand through his whole body right down to his toes.

Then Frida came carrying a tray of empty glasses, pursued by panting and shouting figures, which let fall coins in the pockets of her apron and in her hair and down her plump neck inside her cotton blouse. But she looked over their shoulders at Brundin, who was standing by the corner of his wing of the house making some mysterious signs.

Then the whole company broke up and returned home by land, and down the avenue the babel of voices gradually grew fainter.

Peter was just going to bed. He did not light the lamp, but sat for a moment balanced on the edge of the bed and listening to Stellan breathing beside him. Then he crept to the window again.

All was dark and silent. Only from a chink in a blind

in the bailiff's wing a narrow streak of light cut the darkness. Over the dusky house there hung the witchery of an unknown fear. As Peter stared out he seemed to see a shadow cross the yard and disappear under the lime tree by Brundin's porch. Peter stole quietly down the stairs again. The sky had clouded over and it had become strangely oppressive. There was sighing and whispering in the darkness. Peter walked on the edge of the grass so that the gravel should not crunch beneath his feet. In the sweet smell under the lime tree he suddenly struck against something soft, and heard a low, frightened cry.

It was Hedvig, his sister. He had not seen her the whole evening. He pinched her arm.

"What are you doing here girl?"

Hedvig was breathing heavily. Through the darkness he could almost see how pale she was.

"Frida!" It escaped her in a whisper, and she pointed to a window that stood open where the blind was drawn. "There—there!"

Peter put his arm round her waist in order to pass her on the narrow grass edge. She was trembling and she seemed in a cold sweat, blended of shame, curiosity, and disgust.

"Go in again," he mumbled harshly.

She gave a start as if he had struck her and ran in. But Peter stepped noiselessly up to the open window. There was light inside, and he heard the sound of chairs being moved, giggles, and whispering. But it was impossible to see anything. He carefully pushed aside the blind a little with a pencil.

Between a box in the window and the corner of a yellow wardrobe he could catch a glimpse over the end of the bed of some curls of brown hair and a big, dark hand that pressed against something soft and white.

Peter wanted to lift the blind higher, but then a bottle on the window-sill tipped over; an arm was stretched out and put out the lamp.

He ran away as if possessed.

Now he lies stretched out on his bed, staring into the darkness. He lies as still as a terrified insect feigning death.

Fancy that it was Frida—the Frida who brought in his shoes and clothes in the morning!

Hitherto when Peter had looked at the girl he felt a certain uneasiness in her presence—an uneasiness which found expression chiefly in giggles and rudeness. But nothing in the world would have induced him to touch her.

But Brundin dared! For him nothing was forbidden and nothing dangerous. He did everything he liked.

By contrast with his own helplessness Brundin became a monster of power and impudence.

The darkness became oppressive round the poor boy; he suddenly felt the girl in his inmost being, in the very marrow of his bones. But not her alone, that was the horror of it! This man whom he dreaded, his pet horror, was also there. His feelings were a strange mixture of shame, lust, fear, powerlessness, loneliness, and grief. The very springs of life were diverted and unclean from the beginning. Even his first dreams of awakening were sullied by anxiety and by cowardly, curious hate.

The more tired Peter became the more distinctly did he feel how the chill of old Kristin's hand passed through his body. And Frida dissolved and disappeared. But Brundin remained. He pursued Peter deep into the night's sleep.

His sleep was like that of one in a besieged fortress, where one hears the shots shattering bit by bit the walls that save one from destruction.

Yes; this was the story of Peter the Watch-dog.

We must not forget that this thin and anxious figure was the embryo of the future coarse and brutal Peter the Boss.

V

FEAR

EXCITED and curious, Frida thrust her head into the girls' room.
"If you please, Miss Hedvig—you ought to let me make your bed on a day like this."

Hedvig was leaning over her narrow bed, with her black hair full of curling-papers. She would soon be fifteen years old now. Her breasts were already filling out beneath her bodice. Her lips were very red, and looked almost skinless in her long, pale face.

"No," she said vehemently; "Kristin must come up."

For some time past Hedvig had made her own bed. She could not bear Frida to touch anything of hers. She seemed to shiver as in a cold draught and her teeth began to chatter as soon as the plump, laughing hussy came near her. But the maid did not pay back in the same coin. The excellent Frida had no proud neck. With a mixture of good-nature and bad conscience she only became more servile. "Kristin? Very well."

Humming softly as usual, she vanished down the stairs.

Laura yawned, stretched herself lazily, and shook her fair hair. For all her laziness her arch eyes sparkled. She was not in the least like her elder sister.

"You really are mad, Hedvig," she said, jumping out of the bed.

Then Kristin came puffing and muttering up the stairs. Her old black frock had not shrunk as she herself had done, and it seemed almost empty when she sank down on the edge of the bed. Her hands twitched and trembled as if they had gone to sleep in her lap and were dreaming of knitting-needles.

"Well, Hedvig, do you know your Catechism, so that we need not be ashamed of you?"

Laura came up, stark naked, with a lather of soap on her neck.

"Know her Catechism? when she is overflowing with it!"

The old woman had no smile for this fresh, plump young thing.

"Are you not ashamed, child, to talk like that of God's word? And you won't be ready in time either."

Hedvig had done her hair, and Kristin helped her on with the white frock that reached almost to her ankles. She fumbled a long time with the fastenings at the back, and then she arranged the plaits with bony, trembling fingers.

"Just like dressing a little bride," she muttered. "And truth it is that it is the best of bridegrooms you are meeting to-day!"

But behind Kristin's back Hedvig stole a glance at herself in the mirror. It was with a shy, unsteady look she saw her own image. There was not a spark of fresh and natural joy.

Now it was breakfast-time. The other children, arrayed in their poor best, were already sitting round the table. But it was impossible to get Hedvig down. She remained in the little girls' room, and in the end Kristin had to take a plate of porridge to her. Laura also soon came running back. A new frock was, anyhow, a new frock. And this was almost the beginning of long skirts and putting the hair up. And perhaps she might even see Hedvig cry!

A carriage was heard crunching the gravel outside. Hedvig jumped up. It was only old Hermansson. Yes! of course he must come with them. She sank down on her chair again. Laura was looking at her with big, greedy eyes, purring like a cat.

"He is also coming," she said suddenly in a sleek little voice. "I heard him order the dogcart."

Hedvig turned pale, just as one's knuckles whiten when one clenches one's fist.

"What *he*?"

"Mr. Brundin, of course."

Over Hedvig's face spread an expression of anxious and obstinate defiance which made it look almost old. Everybody was waiting about for an opportunity to point her out, everybody . . .

"What right has he to come? His place is among the

farm-hands." And with that she pushed Laura out of the room and locked the door.

But then she stole to the window and stood there hidden by the curtain.

Then the bailiff, Brundin, came driving in his little dog-cart. He wore a fur coat, a top hat, thrust back on his head, and red dogskin gloves.

Hedvig devoured him with her eyes, just like a boy who steals his first glass of strong drink, and is frightened when it burns his throat. Then she caught sight of Peter. He was standing some distance away with his coarse red hands hanging out of his short sleeves. He pulled a face at the bailiff and then looked furtively up at the girls' room. Hedvig ran away from the window, and sat down in a corner fidgeting with her handkerchief. She looked as if she had been struck.

Now they were calling her. Now she *must* go down. "God, if only it were over!" she thought. Stiffly and hesitatingly, as if afraid to lose her balance, she greeted old Hermansson. But she shot past the outstretched hand of Brundin as if impelled by an invisible force, rushed out to the carriage, and crept into a corner. With her pale face and her screwed-up eyes she looked like some strange creature of the twilight which had been forced out into the merciless spring sunshine.

Old Kristin had to run after her with her coat and hat.

At last the carriage was full and they started off. Out in the yard in the sunshine it was still temptingly warm. The lilac bushes had great green buds and the damp soil of the flower-beds was steaming round the bulbs. But in the avenue they met the cold air from the dirty snow in the ditches. And whenever a little cloud hid the sun for a moment they were back in winter again. It was one of those treacherous and dangerous days when the cautious and the wise, such as old Hermansson, prefer to keep their fur coats on.

It was some distance to the church, which was situated at a crossing of two roads, by the side of a plain which was chequered by the black, brown, and green of fallow land, pastures, and young rye.

Behind it rose a bare slope sprinkled with juniper trees which resembled dark, solid flames. The church was very

old, without a tower. With its high, black roof, its coarse walls of rustic stone, it resembled a fortress, a barn, or a cellar. And there was a musty smell beneath the vaulted roof, for in spite of the big rusty stove, the cold winter air still lingered.

With the troop of children close upon his heels old Hermansson squeezed himself into the high, narrow pew. He did so the more calmly as the pew was at this moment the most respectable place. But to Mr. Brundin the hard-wooden seat of duty at once seemed repugnant.

Hedvig stealthily joined the other children who were to be confirmed, and sat down under the pulpit.

The clergyman was an old, shaggy-bearded man with a face like granite and reindeer-moss. This teacher of Our Lord began the Catechism in a dry, hard voice, as if he were engaged in an interrogation on the four rules of arithmetic rather than in partaking of the divine sacrament. In this severe old church, confronted by this severe old man, the gospel seemed to be a vain mockery and punishment, the great punishment, the only reality. It was strange to hear the young girlish voices answer his lifeless voice, as it spelled out, without a spark of fire, the long record of judgment. It was as if Death had been sitting on a stone and piped a tune on a dry bone while frightened Echo answered from the green shores of life. There was in the quick, breathless repetition of the lesson every degree of fear, from the side-glance which would avoid the whip, down to the low, trembling sigh that dies out in a sob. But he who had ears to hear would nevertheless have been startled by Hedvig's voice. She knew her lesson and her voice did not shake, but there was something unnaturally tense, something of keenest anguish, in her voice.

What sort of a God was it whom Hedvig feared and whom she was to receive to-day at the altar rails? Let us pause to reflect on His origin and on His history, which is much older than Hedvig's first meeting with the clergyman. From the beginning, He was a God from the servants' hall, and He was an inheritance from Hedvig's first horror, the Bogey Man!

We never escape from our first impressions and experiences. They bind us with the fibres of deep-seated roots which we never draw up into the full light of consciousness.

There Kristin, severe and foreboding, stood over the little sugar thief whom she had caught : " Hedvig, if you do not leave the sugar-box alone, the Bogey Man will come and take you."

From the beginning these two experiences blended, and each by unfortunate association strengthened the influence of the other. The more frightened she grew of the Bogey Man, the more she thought of the sugar-box, and the more she thought of the sugar-box, the more frightened she grew of the Bogey Man. At last he overshadowed her whole existence. He was in the dark hole under the kitchen stairs ; in Kristin's big, black book ; in the dull eyes of her moribund, apoplectic father, in the hawk-like face of her grandfather in there over the green sofa. The darker it grew the more dangerous the Bogey Man became. She ate her supper slowly, in order to postpone the inevitable. Alone and silent in her fear she sat amongst her sisters and brothers, who romped and struggled round about her. Then they were driven to bed. " Please, Kristin, don't pull down the blind. Dear Kristin, please leave the lamp lit a little longer."

It was no use. In vain she pulled the bedclothes over her head, the Bogey Man was still there, the blackest thing in the darkness. And he came sneaking into her dreams and groped with his shadow hands about her little trembling heart, so that she often awoke with a loud shriek in the middle of the night.

In her terror, Hedvig attached herself more and more closely to old Kristin, who knew all about all these ominous mysteries. And thus it came about that God succeeded to the Bogey Man.

But this intimacy during the long hours of twilight with an old, tired, and harried creature who had not the sense to spare tender ears was dangerous. In everyday life Kristin's God was a mean and nagging kitchen God whose chief business was to punish the maids' laziness and pilfering. But He had also His greater and more threatening moods, when He emerged from His past in a small soldiers' cottage in a mighty Småland forest to punish incendiaries and murderers, and to look after brownies and trolls. When on Sunday evenings Kristin sat reading aloud from the Old Testament her voice would assume an expression of cruel lamentation, something submissively threatening, which

gripped Hedvig with the deep awe of the people through the dim and distant ages.

In the dark, Hedvig grew frightened of God. Not even school, when it began with its monotonous and mechanical cramming, not even the alleviating joys of companionship, could kill her fear. Amidst the noise of the classroom she sat alone in communion with both the great and the dangerous. Before she could read properly, she spelled out greedily and eagerly the tale of the fall of man and the ten commandments. Especially the seventh commandment made a deep impression on her. Here was the terrible fascination of the unknown. By and by she began to read the Bible for herself. There was much to brood over, much that nourished her fears, which now began to undergo strange transformation. She could sit for hours thinking of such expressions as "circumcision," "menstruation"; then she imagined she bore a son. Her gaze fastened on passages concerning the sin of fornication, the great Babylonian harlot, Absalom's exploits on the roof of the house with King David's concubines.

The darkness enclosing Hedvig's God began to be oppressive. His too early threats provoked the very sins which He intended to prevent. She brooded over evil till at last it began to stir in her blood. Her ever-present fear developed into stealthy, premature curiosity. It was no longer anything so white and innocent as sugar that Hedvig now stole. No! In the forbidden box now lay worm-eaten, half-rotten fruit fallen from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But there was still the same fatal and even more intimate association of ideas, as in the case of the sugar and the Bogey Man.

Soon Hedvig's curiosity found something different from the shadowy figures of the old, rat-eaten family Bible to brood over and to spy out, namely, the bailiff and Frida.

That sultry night when Peter caught her peeping under the blind into Brundin's window had been a fateful night in her life. The discovery of the secret of the bailiff's wing was the greatest and most dangerous discovery she had yet made. Hot and cold by turns, tempted, frightened, caught in the act, she had crept to bed. Her soul was outraged. Night and day the memory of that scene remained with her. She was afraid of Peter, disgusted with Frida, but could not get the man out of her thoughts. It was like an obsession. She

avoided him, scarcely greeted him, could not for anything in the world look him in the face. But secretly she devoured him with her eyes. His bold, wicked self-assurance had some inexpressible allurements for her. She found herself incessantly following this sinner and then fled, frightened and ashamed, to her bed. But as she had shaped her God out of fear, He had no pity and could not help her. This girlish love might have been the means of leading her out into the fresh air if it had not been of such a strange and stunted kind. As it was, it only threw her back more and more upon herself.

Such was the Hedvig who now knelt by the altar rails and received the bread and the wine from the hand of the old clergyman. She had grown up in the shadow of her own dreams like one of those long, white shoots that grow down in the deep darkness. Not one poor, single little bud of her being had been able to open out in the clear sunshine of the busy, living world. In a pew behind her sat the genteel farmer, Brundin, with his pert military moustache, not for a moment suspecting that he was a terrible Behemoth, sucking the nourishment out of a poor little woman's soul.

Communion was over. The girls rose with tear-stained faces and walked slowly, hesitatingly, down the aisle. Hedvig was pale and dry-eyed. Outside it had suddenly begun to snow, wet, ice-cold snow, and it was pathetic to see her as she stood amongst these thinly clad, shivering children, slowly and awkwardly bidding each other good-bye, and looking like butterflies that have left their chrysalis too soon, and have no flowers to rest on. The girl from Selambshof was better dressed than the poor peasant girls. And she was the prettiest of them too. But she looked more forlorn and colder than the poor, lonely little snowdrops that shivered amongst the snowflakes on a poor man's grave behind her.

Old Hermansson had something to say to the Vicar. Brundin came up to Hedvig and made his compliments.

"Well, Hedvig, that went off splendidly! Now you are a big, grown-up lady, and I suppose I must call you Miss Hedvig. But we must not let it snow any longer on your white hat."

He led her to the carriage which was waiting with the hood up, helped her in, and fastened the apron. Hedvig drew back as if his touch had scorched her. When he had gone she sat there trembling and with chattering teeth. Will he

drive before or after us? she thought. If he drives before us, I can sit and look at him the whole time. But when her guardian at last arrived, and they started with Brundin in front, she stared obstinately at a hole in the apron, because she was afraid of God.

Both old Hermansson and Brundin were to stay for dinner. A gloomy snow-light filled the dining-room, and there was a fire burning, just as in mid-winter. Hedvig sat stiff and *silent in the place of honour, and scarcely tasted the food.* Then her guardian solemnly drew forth a present from his coat-pocket. It was a little watch with Hedvig's initials engraved on it. He made a short, admonitory speech before giving it to her, and hoped that she would learn to make the same good use of time as he had done when he was young. He even finished with a little verse :

"May this watch the right time tell
To a little girl who works right well."

Hedvig sat fidgeting on her chair with downcast eyes, as if she were being scolded. It was with difficulty that she stood up and returned thanks for the gift with a stiff curtsy.

Now it was Brundin's turn to put his hand in his pocket. He pulled out a red case, opened the lid with a snap, and, bowing gallantly, handed her a narrow gold brooch.

"Well, Miss Hedvig, I also take the liberty of offering a simple little gift. Please accept it, Miss Hedvig. Hall-marked!"

Hedvig blanched. Her glass trembled against the edge of her plate as she set it down. Her dark eyes fastened, wide-open with fright, on a spot on the wall opposite. She stretched out her hand like a blind man and groped for the case. But she stopped half-way. She had suddenly caught sight of Frida, who, with a bottle of port in one hand and a napkin in the other, forgot her duties and bent over Brundin's shoulder to stare greedily at the glittering ornament. Hedvig's voice, unnaturally tense, suddenly cut the silence:

"No, I don't want the brooch—give it to . . . to Frida instead."

She covered her face with her hands and ran upstairs and threw herself on her bed.

Nobody round the table said anything. Frida tittered a little. Then she stood, crimson, and fidgeted for a moment

before she could pull herself together and go out. Brundin muttered something that sounded like a curse, and sat silently playing with his little fair moustache, looking half embarrassed and half self-satisfied. Peter almost collapsed with excitement.

Now Brundin will be kicked out, he thought, and an agreeable cold shiver passed through his bones. Old Hermansson had become rigid, with his spoon half-way between his mouth and his plate and looking very upset. At last Laura's voice broke the spell :

"Hedvig is mad," she said, and jumped up as she sat on her chair, for she had a curious trick of being able to jump whilst sitting.

There now, she is spoiling everything, thought Peter, and gave her a pinch under the table. Quite right ; old Hermansson did not seize Brundin by the collar and kick him out. Instead he rose with slow dignity, and took up the case and the brooch.

"I will teach this ill-bred girl how to receive a well-meant gift," he said, with an air that promised full amends to Brundin. Then he stalked off after Hedvig.

He found her lying full length on her bed in her white frock, which looked like a shroud. She lay there, dry-eyed, staring up at the ceiling.

"Now put this brooch in your frock, Hedvig, and go down and say 'thank you' nicely," he said.

A shiver passed through her.

"Please, please, leave me alone," she begged.

"Put the brooch on at once !"

"No, no ; it is sinful," she stammered, and turned her face to the wall.

Then old Hermansson thought he ought not to insist any longer. He left the case on the table beside the bed, and went downstairs again.

"The poor child has had a trying day to-day," he said to the bailiff. "She seems strangely upset. I thought I ought to let her put off her apologies."

Then he returned to his tart.

But up in her room Hedvig lay with the red case on her breast. Suddenly she tore out the brooch and stuck the pin deep into her left hand. Then she sucked drop after drop of the slowly oozing blood.

VI

THE TWO FAIR HEADS

THE terrace at Selambshof was adorned with two small ship's-guns on gun-carriages of decayed oak. They were spiked with pine-needles and twigs, and it was long since a birthday salute had been fired with them. Laura sat astride of one of these, swinging her legs lazily and catching maple-blossom in her hat. It was a fine day in the beginning of June, and with each breeze there rained down over the old cannon golden-green maple blossom, and the pools glistened after the night's rain.

Sometimes it almost looked as if an idyll could exist even in the presence of the sham Gothic of Selambshof.

The sun gently warmed the fair down on Laura's neck. She kept behind the house to-day, because she had put up her hair for the first time, though only for fun, of course. She thought it would be jolly to see what sort of a face Herman would make. He would probably appear in the avenue soon.

Otherwise it was rather empty at Selambshof this summer. Peter was laid up with measles. And there was not even Hedvig to quarrel with. She had been sent away to an old aunt in Sala. Usually she had sat and sulked in a corner since the day when she behaved so idiotically to Brundin. It was impossible to get her down into the garden, for she was frightened to approach the bailiff's quarters. And when, into the bargain, old Kristin died, she became so refractory that old Hermansson had to send her away.

Not that Laura understood the reason. But when she sat lonely like this and looked at the shadows of the leaves dancing and jumping about and overtaking each other down on the gravel, it amused her to think of that story. And then suddenly Laura thought of Herman again. Why was he really so anxious to be alone with her lately? Herman

was not like his old self, no—there was something strange about him.

There he was already in the avenue !

Yes, there was Herman Hermansson coming up, with his school-cap on the back of his head and swinging a stick. He tried to look quite unconcerned and indifferent. But he did not succeed, because secretly he stole anxious glances on all sides, and even his whistle sounded somehow shy, humble, and supplicating.

Laura's little woman's heart beat happily, and she felt a gay and mischievous wish to play a little with old Hermansson's tall, fine boy. So she hurried into the kitchen before he had caught sight of her.

There sat Miss Isaksson, the new housekeeper. She was tall, and pale, and thin, and she held the coffee-grinder in one hand and a fat novel in the other. And she ground and read and nodded her head sadly to herself.

Laura peeped out of the window.

"Do they get married?" she giggled.

"I won't look at the end," sighed Miss Isaksson; "but it is a sad book, so they will probably both die."

Now Herman was on the terrace. He glanced shyly round him and had a guilty look. Laura was enjoying herself and did not hurry. She had a vague feeling of superiority over both Herman and poor, thin Miss Isaksson. At last she was pleased to emerge on the steps with an air of marked indifference and boredom.

Herman jumped up as if some one had commanded "attention!" He certainly did not dare to make any comment on Laura's having put her hair up, for that only increased his shyness and diffidence.

"Will you come fishing with me for a bit, Laura?"

"What! Fishing?"

"Do, please, only for a short time."

"Well, perhaps I will, if Stellan comes too."

It was always the same, Stellan had to be there too; and so Herman was forced against his will to go and persuade that young lordling, who lay in a tattered old hammock in the park, staring at his toes, to join them. Only after a long discussion did he lazily get out of the hammock.

At last three floats bobbed about on the half-clear, glittering, greenish June water which can look so warm and

inviting from the shore and is yet so icy cold when you venture in.

Stellan had the first bite.

"What rotten fish! Not worth while getting dirty for!"

He was in a bad temper. It irritated him that Herman could find any pleasure in putting on worms for that fat Laura.

Now it was Herman's turn. His float dived deep down without his noticing it; he was so absorbed in Laura. And when at last he awoke he pulled so violently that the roach got free and the hook caught in Laura's hat. Then Laura scolded him and Stellan shrugged his shoulders.

"Were you hoarse yesterday, Herman?" he said in a cold, mocking voice.

This formula had a crushing effect. Once, when Herman had been reprovved because he did not know his history lesson, he had stood up and said: "Please, sir, I was so hoarse yesterday that I could not learn my lesson." Since then he was always asked the unfortunate question: "Were you hoarse yesterday, Herman?" And each time Laura laughed heartily. It was a cause of inexpressible suffering to his proud, chivalrous nature. Herman tried to keep up an appearance of gay indifference and to join in the laugh of these cruel companions. But his was a poor, weak mockery of a laugh.

They were already thoroughly tired of fishing, and began to jump about on the stones and the roots of the alder trees along the shore. This year's reeds were just beginning to come up between the yellow stalks of last year's, the dragonflies flew past like blue, silken threads in a current of air, and dark green beetles hovered up and down like little balls supported by an invisible force. The day was almost too warm and fine. They could not make up their minds to do anything—they only teased each other and had their little quarrels. Now they are amongst the cows in the Hökar meadow, and Herman catches sight of a starling hopping between the hind legs of the bell-cow and incessantly flying up to catch a fly on its udders.

"Look at that starling, Laura!" he cried, proud of the interesting observation he had made. "Look at that starling—he is friendly with the cow!"

"That's nothing compared with Egypt," snapped Stellan. "There the birds come and pick the teeth of the crocodiles. And they keep their mouths quite still. But, of course, you haven't heard of that."

No, Herman had not heard of that, so probably he had been hoarse again.

Then Laura had an idea. She drew her brother aside.

"I say, Stellan, shall we get Herman to climb the oak?"

It was an enormous oak growing on a green hillock by the roadside, just where the avenue ended.

"All right!"

They sat down on a stone in the shade. Stellan looked up at the tree with the eyes of an expert.

"I say, Herman, that is an awfully difficult tree."

"Not so very. If it weren't so hot . . ."

"Yes, the first bit is easy. I can see that too—but farther up there is a long bit without branches."

"Nonsense! You can swing yourself up. If it weren't so warm . . ."

"Of course—you can brag—but you daren't do it," scoffed Laura.

"Daren't I?"

"No, you daren't."

Herman jumped up, red in the face, and tore off his coat. At last he had a chance of shining, and of dazzling the cruel one by a knightly deed.

"I'll show you whether I dare," he cried.

And then he began to climb. It really was a difficult tree. His fingers were already bleeding and rssh! he tore one of his shirt sleeves. For a moment he was on the point of falling down. The perspiration stood out on his forehead and his heart beat fast. But he set his teeth and struggled on. She was standing down there admiring him.

Now he had reached the very top, swaying in the wind. Breathless he pushed away a branch in order to be seen and to enjoy his triumph.

But the stone was empty. Nobody was visible.

"Laura!" he called. "Laura, do you see that I was not afraid?"

No answer. Down below everything was green, silent, and empty. Above, abandoned, covered with dirt from the wet bark, Herman was sitting up there among the whispering,

swaying masses of leaves. His hands were aching and he had an unpleasant sensation in his stomach. Most of all he would have liked to throw himself down and break his neck in order to punish a hard and unfeeling world.

He resisted this temptation, however, and climbed down with moderate care; he put on his coat and walked home in order to grind at the subjects in which he had failed in his examination last spring. You could see even by his back that he was deeply hurt and had nothing left but duty to live for.

But Laura stepped out from behind one of the trees in the avenue, where she had been hiding with Stellan. She smiled and danced, and her voice rang out clear and mocking in the mellow summer air:

"Were you hoarse yesterday, Herman? Were you hoarse yesterday?"

Herman did not answer. Only his back stiffened still more and he took still longer steps. And then he disappeared behind the willows by the washhouse.

The next day Laura again sat astride the gun, catching maple blossoms in her hat and looking down the avenue now and then, ready to begin the jolly game over again.

But that was not to be. Herman did not come. It was almost dinner-time and still Herman did not come. "I see; he is sulking," thought Laura. "Well, let him!" And with her nose in the air she hopped away to the lean Miss Isaksson and borrowed a big novel.

But Stellan was lying in the hammock like a fish in a net and yawned and became more and more sleepy and bad-tempered. At last he climbed out, however, opened the gate with a kick, without taking his hands out of his pockets, and slipped down to the jetty where the washing and rinsing was done, and where Selambshof's rotten old rowing-boat lay hopelessly water-logged and simply could not be made watertight.

"What an establishment, this Selambshof! What a dilapidated, dull, impossible old place!"

And just at this moment the special steamer with the usual Stonehill party for the summer arrived. He could see little Percy in white sailor trousers walking along the pier.

Stonehill lay on the other shore, opposite Selambshof.

It was an awfully fine place with a big globe mirror and white plaster statues and coloured-glass windows round the verandahs, as was the fashion in the villas of the well-to-do at that time. And there were temples and hothouses with peaches and grapes, for Percy's mother was awfully rich. His father had got his money by smuggling during the war in America. But now he was dead.

Stellan kicked angrily at what was left above water of the old rowing-boat. How could he get across to Stonehill now?

It was only last summer that he had made the acquaintance of the "china doll." He called Percy Hill "china doll" because he looked so brittle and so fine. That summer he had also had plenty of fun on the lake with Manne von Strelert at Kolsnäs, for Manne never wanted to be at home because his tutor was there. Stellan thought this was a pity, because there was nothing he admired so much as the horses at Kolsnäs. But Manne was so obstinate! And there was added spice in their excursions on the lake since they had noticed the boy in white stealing behind the rose hedge and the fine, high fence at Stonehill, and gazing enviously at them. In order to tease him they used to hover about the Stonehill landing-stage. One day Manne called out:

"Won't you come out on the lake with us?"

"I'm not allowed."

"Come out on the landing-stage, then."

"Mother is afraid I might tumble in."

"What have you got a sailor's suit on for, then?"

The boy could not answer. He was a prisoner of the roses. He was a poor little land sailor, and the two sun-burnt sailors jeered at him mercilessly.

"You're a beastly coward!" called Manne. "I have ridden the legs off a horse and I have thrashed my tutor. You are a beastly coward!"

Then the boy in white stepped out on to the stage. "My name is Percy," he said, with a wan little smile, "and I am not a coward."

Then he climbed into Stellan's boat.

"Now, let us see who can splash the other most!" cried Manne, and Percy was wet through at once.

"Now you will be spanked when you get home."

Percy's face looked troubled.

"No, but I shall have to go to bed. And then the doctor will come, of course."

At this stage in their acquaintance Stellan suddenly checked Manne's arrogance and changed his tactics. He had suddenly come to think of all the fine things visible through the railings round Stonehill.

"Take off your coat and spread it out on the seat and it will soon dry," he said.

Percy obeyed. After a moment's reflection Stellan continued: "So you never get a thrashing?"

"No," said Percy, with something of a sigh.

"Must you go without your dinner, then?"

"Without dinner?" asked Percy, astonished. "They stuff me with food."

This somehow appealed to Stellan.

"Perhaps you are allowed to eat as much as you like in the hothouses," he mumbled, almost shyly.

"Of course," answered Percy, with indifference.

"May I come with you some time?"

"Yes; come to-morrow, both of you, and we'll have fruit juice and biscuits first, and then go into the hothouses."

It was in this way Stellan penetrated beyond the high white fence round Stonehill. From the beginning he tried to imitate the aristocratic indifference of the "china doll" to all the good things to eat. Except, of course, when he thought nobody was looking, and then he gobbled up all he could. Worldly wisdom and fine manners are all very well, but we are only human after all. . . .

Yes, all this had happened the year before. Now he was cut off from all that splendour because of the rotten old boat, and he was ashamed to go in the gardener's tarred punt.

Stellan was already walking away from the pier, where the water glittered and beat so mockingly against the wet boards, when it suddenly struck him that at Ekbacken old Hermansson had a smart little craft that was decorated every Sunday with a fine display of streamers in the stem and a flag in the stern.

"I was beastly stupid yesterday," he thought—"beastly stupid," and his usual expression, a cool, half-sneer, returned.

Stellan stole cautiously across the park so as not to be seen or have Laura on his heels. From the bend in the avenue he had a good view of Ekbacken. And he stopped a moment, impressed by the sight. It seemed as if he were looking at Ekbacken for the first time. An expression of amazing cunning came into Stellan's face, as he passed in through the red wooden gateway. Already his thoughts travelled far, far beyond to old Hermansson's fine little boat.

"Ekbacken Sawmill and Shipyard" was a fine old business that ran itself. Trustworthy, leisurely old workers stalked about on the timber rafts inside the boom, and there were steady old grey sailors who had sailed in all the seas of the world, and were now caulking old brigs and barges. And inside in the office sat the book-keeper, Lundbom, with eyeglasses and a leather shade, writing out bills to a lot of good and safe customers, who paid in cash and not with miserable acceptances. There also sat old Hermansson reading his paper. There was such a blessed peace that he had smoked half his cigar and the ash was still on it.

He looked up at Stellan with an expression of fatherly benevolence.

"Good morning, my dear boy. You are looking for Herman, I suppose, but he is at his lessons now. Yes, that's what happens when you are ploughed. Come along, now, and let us have a talk."

Stellan asked for nothing better. They went over to the house in a pretty oak wood just by the road to town. On the other side spread soft, billowing, green fields set with old brown barns. This land also belonged to Ekbacken, but was let to tobacco growers. On the town side the estate was sheltered by some stony hillocks with a few pines here and there, behind which, however, some high, bare walls had already shot up and threatened to destroy the idyll.

The house itself was an old but well-preserved one-storey house, long and low, where everything from the door handles to the brass doors of the Marieberg earthenware stoves was radiantly clean and polished.

"Why have I not been to Ekbacken more often?" thought Stellan.

Old Hermansson talked about school and praised Herman because he had worked hard, which praise the young man

listened to with an open countenance. It opened up further vistas to him. Cleverly he manœuvred the conversation in the direction he wanted. School and school friends, of course! There was Manne at Kolsnäs. He was a jolly decent fellow. And his father, who was a chamberlain to the King, could come and go at Court just as he pleased. And they had footmen and horses and everything else. It really was strange that Herman did not see more of Manne. Manne liked Herman awfully. He had told Stellan so—and fancy what fun it would be for Manne to look at all the boats in the yard. And Percy Hill. Didn't Mr. Hermansson know him and how tremendously rich he was? And Percy was so awfully generous and kind and obedient. Mr. Hermansson would certainly like him. . . .

It became clearer and clearer to Stellan. It was as if he could look straight through old Hermansson and discover his little vanity. Victory seemed already secure, when at last he got out his real purpose. It would soon be his birthday. He had been so often in Manne's and Percy's homes that he was really ashamed, and wanted most awfully to invite them to something in return. But he could not do so at home, as Mr. Hermansson would understand. There was poor father, who was nothing for strangers to look at. And, besides, Peter had measles. So wouldn't it be nice if Mr. Hermansson would be so awfully kind as to let him have a little party here at Ekbacken, where everything was so fine and elegant? And as to the cost, well, his mother had left Stellan something, and he might use that.

"Nonsense, my boy," beamed old Hermansson; "I will give a little dinner for you with pleasure."

Then Stellan rushed into Herman and slapped him on the back.

"I say, you're not angry still, are you? We'll stick together—what?"

Herman, in the loneliness of his heart, was not the one to reject a word of reconciliation.

Next day they rigged out old Hermansson's little lugger. For many years it had done nothing else but lie by the pier and look smart, for old Hermansson was rather afraid of the lake, even though he was owner of a shipyard. But now, as I have already mentioned, the boat was fitted out. It was also the result of Stellan's diabolical powers of per-

suasion that the boys were permitted to sail the boat. Herman had never dreamt of such happiness. They started at once for Stonehill and Kolsnäs, and conveyed the invitation for the birthday party at Ekbacken.

At home at Sclambshof Laura sank into ever deeper and deeper reflections. Herman no longer came up the avenue. And Stellan was also away most of the time. Our young lady felt lonely and very bored. Whenever she did get hold of Stellan he only shrugged his shoulders and looked contemptuous. And he always managed to get away without her discovering where he went.

But one fine day when she was sitting on the landing-stage, there came a smart white sailing-boat gliding past. At the toresail-sheet sat Herman. But astern Stellan was lounging like a prince, his head against the tiller and his feet up against the gunwale. When he caught sight of Laura on the landing-stage he put about so that Herman should not notice her. And Laura was so dumbfounded and furious that she did not call out to them. She roamed about on the shore and felt deserted, cheated of her fun. To crown all, she saw Stellan try on an absolutely new black suit with long trousers which had been sent from town.

"What are you getting a new suit for?"

"I'm giving a dinner," said Stellan carelessly.

"Where? Here?"

"No! At Herman's. My birthday's coming."

"I suppose I am to come too?"

"No, it's a men's dinner, you see—ta-ta!" With that he pushed Laura out of the room. The new suit was the logical result of Stellan's diplomacy. Hang it all, you can't very well appear in anything when you have such smart guests.

But Laura threw herself down on her bed and stared at the ceiling. She did not cry—but she wanted to tear her face. "How stupid I have been," she thought—"goodness, how stupid I have been!"

Next morning she got up early. It was not yet nine o'clock when she came dancing into her guardian's room at Ekbacken as he sat shaving with deliberate and methodical dignity. She shone like a little sunbeam, and had a bunch of the brightest wild flowers in her hand. Then she ran

about for a vase and placed it between the wash-basin and the soap-dish, so that nobody could mistake the object of her attention.

"How awfully good of you, uncle, to give a dinner for Stellan." . . .

"And, of course, you would love to come," muttered her guardian through the lather.

"Rather, as it is Stellan's birthday. But there are to be only boys."

"Yes, but we ought to have a hostess, even though it is a men's dinner."

Laura suddenly grew serious, terribly serious.

"Oh, but my old red frock is worn out, and, besides, the sleeves are too short."

"But supposing you came to town with me one day and bought a new frock. . . ."

Laura jumped up in his lap and kissed him in the middle of the lather.

"Oh, thank you, dear darling! But don't tell Stellan and Herman!"

Thus it came about that when at last that birthday dinner came off, and the boys had already been down to look at the sawmill, and had been climbing in the shrouds of the old brigs, and had been chatting with the jolly old tars—who should be standing on the front steps to receive them like an amiable hostess but Laura, dressed in a brand-new silk frock, almost down to her ankles and full of bows and frills.

For a moment Stellan frowned, but his face soon lit up with involuntary approval. At least one didn't need to feel ashamed of the girl.

But Herman grew quite red in the face and was unable to get out a sound, but stole in without daring to look at her. She was altogether too lovely.

It was quite a smart dinner. Old Hermansson offered wine, and even made a little speech for the young people. Speech-making was his weakness.

While the others were going out into the garden for coffee, Laura seized the opportunity and gave Herman a kiss behind a door—a swift, fugitive little kiss on the cheek. But for Herman it was as if the doors of Paradise had been suddenly flung wide open. He sat there mute amidst the

chatter and laughter, and revelled in the wonderful thought that the girl in the silk frock, the beautiful Laura, had kissed him.

And Laura also paused in drinking her coffee and munching her sweets, and remembered how his cheeks had burnt her lips. It really was rather pleasant to kiss. Neither did it cost anything—possibly just the contrary. . . .

They carefully avoided speaking to each other, and they could not for the world have looked each other in the eyes.

After this Stellan and Laura detached themselves more and more from their brothers and sisters and came more and more frequently to Herman's house. They both felt that the sombre and shabby Selambshof was not their chosen field. No! Ekbacken was quite different—here you escaped the sight of your father sitting about in his dull fashion. From here intercourse with Stonehill and Kolsnäs was easiest. Here, with their guardian, they had the exciting and pleasurable feeling of being at the heart of things. They felt already, those two fair heads, that it was Ekbacken that was to be their stepping-stone to success in the world.

V I I

BRUNDIN'S DOWNFALL

IT had been a long autumn. With grey creeping mists and ankle-deep slush, November had drawn a close ring round Selambshof.

Peter was alone in the daytime. As he had been ploughed again in his examination, he had had to leave school, and it was not yet decided what he was going to do. But time passed quickly all the same, for recently he had had lots of things to attend to.

For example, the great pig-slaughter. Since six o'clock this morning he had been strolling about in the dark yard, and as soon as dawn came he was down by the pigsty behind the cowshed.

The cowherd came trailing one poor pig after another. Then they were raised on to the slaughter-block, and instantly Anders, the stableman, stuck them in the neck so that the blood spurted out. The bailiff was there himself, and scratched the pigs' backs with his stick and chatted in friendly tones to them before execution. But old Kristin was no longer there with the pail to collect the blood. As long as she kept going, she had taken part in the slaughter of the pigs. Silent and solemn she used to stand there, bent over her pail, stirring the blood as did the rest of the tribe in days of old at the great winter sacrifice. There was a strange emptiness after her. But the crows were still here. Flocks of them settled in the high, bare lime tree, and their croaking seemed like the voice of the grey November day. Now and then they flew for a moment down towards the steaming hot tripe as if to give a reminder of their ancient rights.

I-i-i-i! squeaked a pig again, and the crows rose for a moment as if from the pressure of the cry. But Peter kept near the corner of the cowshed the whole time; he came no nearer, and Brundin thought he was frightened.

"Come and help us. What kind of a country lad are you to be frightened of the killing?"

But the bailiff was mistaken. Peter was not at all frightened because the pigs were squealing. He was only afraid that they were squealing for Brundin's benefit and not for his own and Selambshof's. He stood, anyhow, sufficiently near to hear what was called out at the weighing-machine, and if you looked carefully you could see that his lips moved the whole time. He stood there counting and muttering the figures in an undertone in order to get them to stick in his memory. For Peter had really a great deal in his memory. It was not the first time he stood aside like this and counted and measured. But then he also knew to a nicety how much grain, potatoes, milk, and butter had been driven into town during the whole autumn. What cunning, what tricks and pretences, what long, patient watches had not been necessary to keep count of all this. No, Peter was not troubled for the pigs' sakes. There was good reason to look out for Peter the Watch-dog nowadays. He no more looked as if he was afraid of a beating. And he had become bigger of body and deeper of voice.

Of course Peter was still afraid of Brundin. But his terror no longer rose up like a mountain in front of him. Brundin's great and wonderful power had already been dealt the first blow. That was when the mighty Brundin had agreed without protest to Frida's being dismissed. Peter had brooded for days over this. And as he pondered he observed that Brundin did not reach into the clouds. And his great fear shrank up exquisitely into a little heap of envy, anxiety and angry suspicion.

Peter did not go to his guardian, because it was he who had placed Brundin in authority. Perhaps he was even in league with the dangerous fellow. Imagine suspecting old Hermansson! Ignorance is either very credulous or very suspicious. In this case it was suspicious. And, besides, Peter the Watch-dog was one of those who prefer hunting alone.

The pig-sticking was finished. The November day was silent and grey as before.

Peter was still standing on his stone by the corner of the cowshed. Round him the filth resembled a bog, and Brundin came splashing through it. He no longer looked

so good-tempered. His little fairy moustache curled contemptuously at the rain, the mud, the smell of manure, and the whole of the November atmosphere. He stopped just in front of Peter, rocking on his heels and reflecting.

"Yes, Anders, get the dogcart ready. I am going to town after dinner all the same."

Peter started. Brundin going into town! Here was an opportunity. He leaped after the bailiff through the mud. Outside the bailiff's quarters he even sidled up to the object of his fear. And he was still like a great mountain when you came near to him—a high mountain with mocking, superior airs.

"I just wanted to come in and glance at the map for a moment," muttered Peter.

Brundin hummed a little tune and good-humouredly led the boy into the office, which lay to the right of the entrance-hall in the bailiff's wing.

Now Peter was actually in the lion's den. The yellow, cracked old plan of Selambshof hung over the sofa. For a long while Peter was tremendously interested in it. Then he began to glance round to right and left, and make strange trampling movements to and fro like a bear on a hot plate. Indeed, he was not exactly beautiful to look at, but deserved, perhaps, a certain admiration. As a matter of fact, he required a great deal of self-control to remain in Brundin's room.

Peter looked for the account books of the estate. From outside he had often stolen a glance at them where they were lying on the writing-desk. But now they were not there. They could not be anywhere else but in the big brown cupboard between the windows.

The key was in the lock.

Peter sat down on the sofa and turned over the pages of a price list. Brundin lit his pipe, looked over his papers, and did not seem to be in a hurry. Peter perspired more and more.

At last the bailiff had to leave the room for a moment. Instantly Peter jumped up and took the key out of the cupboard. And he did more than that—he lifted off the hooks of one window, both the inner and the outer. Then another idea seized him: he took up another key from amongst the rubbish on the writing-desk and pushed it into the keyhole of the cupboard so that nothing should be noticed. He was no fool.

Now the cracked o'd dinner-gong sounded, and with his booty in his damp hands, Peter stole out of the lion's den.

After dinner came the first disappointment. The dog-cart was never brought out, for Brundin received some Saturday guests and put off his journey to town until Sunday. Peter had got to wait—a difficult task. He could not stay at home. He felt so brittle and queer from the strain that he scarcely dared to put his foot down on the ground, and still he had to go on walking and walking. Now he had already reached town, and once there he of course made for the hay market. Shivering, and with a queer trembling in the pit of his stomach, he stood in the Saturday crush, amidst sacks of potatoes and sides of beef, staring at a big sign on a low yellow house with a tiled roof :

AXEL BRUNDIN & CO.

CEREALS, GRAIN, AND VEGETABLES.

It was not the first time Peter had stood there spying. He felt a need, as it were, to assure himself all the time that the shop was still there. A fat old man usually stood in the doorway with his thumbs stuck in the armholes of his waistcoat. He was Brundin's brother. He knew him from the crayfish party. Most of the produce of Selambshof went to him. And Peter had an intuition that here lay the solution of some of the problems that worried him.

Just fancy if only he could send in a policeman to take a big bag of money from that fat old rascal !

Slowly Peter the Watch-dog sauntered homewards in the dark and raw November night.

He awoke very early on Sunday morning. First he examined the office window. Yes, the hooks were still unfastened. Then he might just slip down to the outhouses for a little. There had been frost during the night and there were a few light snowflakes in the air. Peter crept into the barn through a broken shutter. On the ground floor the pig carcasses gleamed with a pale light in the deep twilight. He touched the hard, cold fat. He felt how the pigs hung helpless there. And once more he had a frantic sense of his duty to defend them against Brundin. He promised them that they had not died in vain.

Then Peter climbed to the next floor. Here the grain lay about in big heaps on the floor. He sat down and let

the wheat run through his fingers. Usually it is pleasant to sit in a granary and let the cool, round, fragrant grains of corn run softly through the fingers. It makes one think of summer and sunshine and the wide green fields.

But Peter, poor boy, had no such spacious feelings of the prospective farmer. Everything had been spoilt for him by Brundin. The gifts of the soil were poisoned for him by a premature greedy anxiety.

At breakfast Peter was very silent. He did not fight with his brothers and sisters, but of his own free will sat down next to his father, even though it was not his turn. To-day was a great day, and he tried to propitiate the gods by this sacrifice. You must neglect nothing if you would succeed. He also stole to church afterwards in order to be quite on the safe side. Straight as a poker he sat there trying to be really attentive, though of course he only listened to his own thoughts. Peter had a long, intimate conversation with his God. And what kind of God had Peter the Watch-dog? He was related to his sister Hedvig's God. Both had grown out of a common parentage. Old Kristin's servants' God. Both had drawn their nourishment from the terrors of those years of helplessness. But, whilst Hedvig's God had been reared on the fear of desire and of sex, Peter's God was from the first an economic potentate, who severely punished torn clothes and broken money-boxes, and He had gradually developed into a protector of the rights of property, with the more specific function of making the bailiff of Selambshof smart. But Peter was afraid that God might not have had time to consider the matter properly, and therefore he gave Him in all humility a number of delicate little hints as to the most suitable way of dealing with Brundin. ↓

Yes! such was Peter Selamb's communion with God on this day of great expectations—which, however, became a day of disappointment.

At last evening came. The bailiff had already driven off to town and the yard was in darkness. Then Peter crept out in order to steal back Selambshof from Brundin. If only he could get a glance at that armful of big blue books all would be clear. His housebreaking was quite successful, the windows opened, as did also the door of the cupboard, and in there he felt the books side by side. With the precious burden in his arms, Peter stole up the dark stairs to the

Observatory. He locked the door carefully, lit a piece of candle, and sank down trembling with expectation at the table, and began to examine the books.

And then he made a terrible discovery. He understood nothing, absolutely nothing of this system of figures and lines. "Debit," "credit," "carried forward," etc., stood there. What it all meant he could not make out. The name "Axel Brundin & Co." he found everywhere in the books. It stared out at him with ever-increasing mystery. It was not at all the straightforward way that Peter had imagined in connection with sacks of flour and barrels of potatoes. He found nothing to hold fast to. At last his head swam. He could not master Brundin's rows of figures.

Peter struck his forehead against the table, cursing and sobbing. This was a terrible defeat. Hopeless, miserable, stiff with cold, he stole down from the icy Observatory, and put the books back in the cupboard without having succeeded in stealing a single one of the bailiff's secrets.

That night chronicled a grievous relapse into the old sense of impotence. Peter lay again in a besieged fortress. And the Giant pursued him through a cycle of gruesome dreams. Amongst other things the "Dreadful One" ate six recently slaughtered pigs in a trice, whilst Frida stood stark naked before him and stirred a pail containing Peter's blood.

But in spite of all this the old days were over. Peter the Watch-dog began slowly to pluck up courage again. As he brooded and brooded he realised at last that it was no longer possible to hunt alone. And so it came about that Peter too began to haunt Ekbacken. But he took very good care not to run up against Stellan and Laura, whose road lay in the same direction. He did not aim so high as they. He had no desire to talk to his guardian. No; Peter hovered about the old book-keeper, Lurdbom. His opportunity came in the evenings, when the old man sat in his own room smoking his pipe and drinking his hot whisky, with his books in front of him. He questioned him patiently and insistently until the old man felt touched by the interest of this promising youth in double-entry Italian book-keeping, and gave him proper instruction. Peter literally sucked up the information. He was not difficult to teach. Now he could calculate—he who had always failed in his examinations in mathematics. With every successful

addition he added something to his power, and with every correct subtraction he subtracted something from Brundin's. Oh, what bliss it was to feel how his bugbear was again shrinking and growing less each day.

During these efforts Peter had not ceased his observations. Now he knew what had been sent from the estate during four whole months, prices and all. Then he repeated his bold stroke one Saturday evening, when the bailiff went to town as usual to enjoy himself. But this time he could decipher the mysterious writing. Oh, it was an hour of feverish triumph up there in the Observatory! Peter the Watch-dog found at once audacious frauds to fasten his teeth into, amongst other things Axel Brundin, who was only debited for sixty barrels of potatoes during November and December. But Peter knew for certain that the correct figure was seventy-three. There he had a bite at the two brothers' hind legs.

Peter lay sleepless the whole night and fed his revenge on Brundin.

Early on Sunday morning he stalked over to Ekbacken and found his guardian in bed. Now he no longer shunned the public gaze or beat about the bush. He went straight to the point, was bold and insinuating. He cast the stolen rye and potatoes straight in old Hermansson's face. But his guardian jumped up highly offended.

"What are you saying, boy? Remember that you are talking of a person I have appointed. How did you get hold of the books? What do you know about the yield of the estate?"

But Peter was not to be intimidated. He came back, time after time, with his rye and his potatoes. Gradually his guardian began to soften.

"But it's not possible," he sighed dismally. "I am not accustomed to people betraying my confidence in this way. Very sad, really very sad! Why did I ever undertake the thankless task of becoming your guardian? Most sad and unpleasant!"

After this he ordered his shaving-water and began to dress. Peter sat still with his armful of books and watched his guardian. As soon as he was dressed he recovered his dignity and his authority.

"I shall arrange for an investigation," he said. "Go

back to your lessons now, my dear Peter. This is no matter for children."

No; there Uncle Hermansson was right. This was no matter for children. That's why he ought to have looked after it better himself.

Peter sauntered home again, entirely liberated from his frightened sensation in the presence of grown-ups, and of their authority and their ability.

After service old Hermansson came solemnly driving up to Selambshof, and conducted a great investigation in the office in the absence of Brundin.

There was no end to the revelations now. Every one had something to say against the bailiff. As soon as the ice was broken, accusations poured in against the culprit. They almost fought to stick their knives into him in order to save their own skins.

Evidently Selambshof had been systematically robbed for years.

In the midst of all this, Brundin came driving back from town in a state of mild intoxication. The old Fairy Prince now cut a poor figure. He seemed quite nonplussed that the old servants should have so completely forgotten his gifts to them, his snuff, his gin, and his blind eye to their own little peculations. For a moment he stiffened and made an insolent effort to deny everything, but he failed miserably in the face of Anders' evidence. Anders had become anxious about his carelessness in the matter of receipts, etc., and had himself written down all that he had driven into town in order to protect himself.

Peter did not now stand aside as at the sticking of the pigs. No, he stood in the midst of the crowd. Now he had a voice in the matter. Sometimes he laughed suddenly, a giggling, nervous laughter. The boy seemed suddenly to have grown into something more like a man. When the examination was over he suddenly looked quite disappointed. For his part he would have liked to go on for ever! The old servants left, however, and old Hermansson went home to consult a lawyer. Brundin sat alone in the office, ruminating. Then Peter thrust his face through the door, grinning.

"You thief!" he cried. "You cursed thief!"

Oh, it was heavenly to spit at the cracked Colossus, really to trample the old fear under foot.

No action was brought against Brundin. He himself possessed nothing, but his brother was frightened into paying a round sum corresponding to the proved losses of the estate.

Then came the ignominious departure. He had been ill for some days, but now he was off at last.

Peter did not show himself at first. But down under the lime tree stood Hedvig. She had come straight home when she heard of the scandal. There she stood, pale and stiff and motionless, and watched Brundin's furniture being carried out. God only knows what she thought and felt. Perhaps it was a feeling of dismal deliverance.

Now the sledge with its load of furniture slipped towards the town, crunching through the half-melted snow mixed with sand—a bad surface for sledging. Brundin had not even put his head outside the door, but now he had to get out. Crestfallen, grey, with downcast eyes, he came out with a dining-room clock under his arm. Hedvig only stared at him. His eyes met hers for a moment when he was getting into the sledge. He bowed awkwardly, and then the spring of the clock made a noise as if it had been broken. Hedvig did not bend her head, did not return his greeting. She stood there like a graven image, and there was something of a rigid, dark triumph in her expression.

But when Brundin disappeared down the avenue she stole into his empty house, and with a face suddenly grey with the hunger of love she rubbed it against the empty walls.

But Peter stood down at the corner of the avenue. He had relapsed into his old habit of going somewhere alone to meditate. He wondered how it was that Brundin was not put into prison. Fancy if it was because old Hermansson did not dare to bring Brundin into court! What was it Kristin used to say? "It's a pity for those children who have to have a guardian," she used to say. Well, Peter did not exactly believe that old Hermansson had cheated them. But he had, all the same, a vague feeling that the matter ought not to be forgotten.

The distrust we learn during the years when we have a right to be trustful easily becomes a dangerous weapon.

It was now a little later in the spring. A new bailiff of proved honesty had been appointed, and Peter was sent to an elementary agricultural school in the Uppland plain.

He did not like being there. The other pupils seemed to him dull, the soil unfavourable. The Brundin case was still fermenting within him. He longed to be home. There are many kinds of home-sickness, and one of them is of a kind not suitable for poetry.

Let us now look at our friend Peter during the spring ploughing. The pupils were standing in a bunch out on the clay, and each one had to plough a plot with the new American steel plough.

"Press harder on the right guide. Not too shallow and not too deep. Look at the horses. The furrows must be straight as a die."

Thus said the teacher. Peter was the last. He stood there changing feet and thinking that he would take root in the clay. At last it was his turn. He called to the horses and the furrow was started. It was a still April day with big white clouds in the sky. The horses' sides and the newly turned clay soil shone in the sun. Down in a hollow hung a blue mist, and farther away a wood of budding birches shimmered like a purple-brown cloud. But Peter neither saw nor felt anything of all that. Nor did he enjoy seeing how finely the ploughshare cut through and turned up the frozen soil. He had no desire just to add furrow to furrow in the ploughed field. He only thought it was heavy, tiresome, lost labour. And all the same he looked like a peasant, with his coarse features and his heavy, awkward carriage which he had probably inherited from his mother's side. But a poison had entered into the peasant's body. It was the infection of the town—the town that had begun to creep nearer and nearer Selambshof. It was anxiety to turn everything into money. If only he were back at Selambshof, he thought. But he did not long for the house or the trees. He longed to steal about, and spy and struggle for possession of the money that he already scented. To go about here, ploughing soil that was not even his own, made him sick. He had already developed the habit of looking at everything from the point of view of ownership. You cannot take any interest in a thing for itself. No, nothing exists in itself but only as "mine" or "yours," principally "mine." To whom did this field belong? To the county? That is the same thing as nobody. That was empty, strange, and simply repellent, thought Peter. He had already begun to

fear common interests and common institutions. They constituted a kind of silent affront to his selfishness.

Then Peter came slowly back on the return, and moved alongside his first furrow. It did not look very straight. He was reprovèd by his instructor—he heard the numbling and suppressed laughter of his fellow-students. What stupid country bumpkins they were, with their lazy self-confidence. Their rustic self-importance about spray-drains and dung-wells irritated him. What experience of life had they had? It would do them good to get caught in the snares of somebody like Brundin and to be really, thoroughly cheated for once. And then he began to think of that old story again. There was something strangely fascinating in thinking of Brundin's tricks and wheezes. Of course he disapproved of it all. But he could not help thinking of it all the same. "So that is what they call business," thought Peter. "That is the way to get rich." He felt a strange disquietude; one moment he was hot and the next cold. "I shall never allow anybody to cheat me," he thought. "But how can you really make sure? The only way is, of course, to go to meet one's enemy and forestall him. You must practise deception—not much, of course, but sufficient to prevent him from deceiving you."

Peter had now done his allotted share of the ploughing. He stopped the horses and wiped his brow.

"You are not ploughing deep enough or straight enough. This is not a surface-plough. You ought to get down to the subsoil all the way. What sort of a growth do you expect to get here?"

"I don't care a damn!" thought Peter.

Then the farm gong sounded, and they moved homewards along the wet road. Peter jogged beside the horses with half-closed eyes. He was dreaming of Selambshof in figures. He had seen them—when he pried into the books of the estate. There were rents for land and houses, for fishing rights, and quarries, for cartage, and for the produce of the estate. Enormous sums in his eyes. "I shall control all that money," he thought. "I shall be bailiff, and I shall have my reward, because I saved the estate from Brundin. No, don't imagine that I can be kept out of all that."

Peter breathed heavily. He felt a queer sucking sensation in his stomach. Fancy if it should all be his! Fancy

if one day he should become rich—rich! No, he no longer had only fear and worries—certain timid, trembling, voluptuous desires contracted his throat.

Is it then to be wondered at that Peter Selamb did not plough deep enough in the alien and unsympathetic Uppland clay?

These were the days of his betrothal to wealth.

VIII

SEPTEMBER SPRING

L AURA lay awake the whole night reading a novel, and at breakfast she only played with her food. Then she stole out into the pantry and took her usual draught of vinegar.

It was a day in the late summer, warm and still. Down the slope the August pears were tempting, the hammock and the lazy lapping of the water against the shutters of the bathing-box were also a standing temptation. But Laura resisted them. For a whole fortnight she had struggled to get rid of her sunburn and to become pale and thin. Slowly she went back to her room and tried to think at each step that she was rather weak and feeble.

Laura's room was small and shadowy. It lay on the ground floor overlooking the avenue. She walked up to the mirror and scrutinised herself carefully from head to foot. She was no longer a plump little bright-eyed imp with plaits of fair hair dangling behind, and fat legs. No, it was a pale, interesting-looking young lady who stood there with a curled fringe, neat waist, and a tired and dreamy look in her eyes.

When Laura had gazed at herself for a long while, with mixed feelings of complete approval and vague, moved pity, she stole to the window and sat down very carefully as if she had been made of some very brittle material. It was a narrow and rather dismal window in the thick walls of Selambshof. A spray of the sparse and dying vine on the north side of the house flapped against the window-sill. It bore a small bunch of grapes, green and as big as pin-heads. What sweet doll's grapes they are, she thought suddenly, and she had a vision of a doll's party in the nursery with grapes for dessert. But she punished herself immediately for this childishness. She had indeed other things to

think of. Piously she laid her hands one over the other and settled down comfortably in the chair, and with her new-found refinement of melancholy she dreamed that she was in very weak health and very sad—a really seductive little dream!

Then Herman came walking towards the house, straight, smart, and correct. He was wearing a student's cap, for by dint of hard work and an ambitious spirit he had come so far. And in spite of the heat he did not wear it tipped back, but on top of his head as if it were a part of the uniform of manhood and knowledge. And he did not look around him so nervously under an affected unconcern. No, now he looked just a little haughty as he came straight up to Laura's window, climbed up on the seat, and shook hands with her.

"Why do you never come to Ekbacken nowadays? It's a fortnight since you were there."

Laura half closed her eyes and smiled a wan smile. Her hand dropped out of his and lay like a tired little bird on the window-sill.

"My dear Herman, we have been there too much already."

"What nonsense!"

Laura was vexed at his clumsiness in not noticing her haggard appearance.

"Besides, I don't feel very well, you know, Herman."

That was too much, even for Herman. He could not help laughing.

"You ill, Laura! Don't talk such rubbish!"

What unfeeling, hard-hearted laughter. After all her efforts. At that moment she thoroughly detested him. But she did not answer sharply; she only looked deeply grieved and pained.

"Good-bye," she murmured; "I am too tired to talk to you any longer. I must lie down for a while."

Thereupon she closed the window in Herman's face and pulled down the blind. Then she lay down on her bed and thought how unseeing and cold-hearted people were. Did they want to make her drink more vinegar? Well, she was not frightened, although she had heard that it might make her really ill.

For another week Laura continued the darkness and

vinegar treatment, and then walked resolutely down to old Hermansson.

At Ekbacken the saws were humming as smoothly as ever in the red shed. The sailors were still there caulking the old smacks, and old Lundbom was still casting up not unfavourable balances. Nothing had changed at Ekbacken, except that it had grown a little older and more peaceful. But now and then a certain ill-disposed rival would rub his hands and think that Ekbacken would prove too good for this world.

Old Hermansson was not in the office. He did not often appear there nowadays. He sat in his dressing-gown and smoking-cap in the big easy-chair in the drawing-room, reading a newspaper that he held far from his eyes as if not to come into too close contact with the restlessness and misery of the world.

Old Hermansson had aged considerably of late. He was almost always poorly now. But he did not complain. He protested with more and more marked dignity against his weakness. Unconsciously the Brundin case had dealt a nasty blow to his assurance and comfort. In consequence, his tone had become more self-satisfied and domineering than ever. The old man was really quite tender-hearted beneath his hard exterior, and Stellan and Laura had at once perceived this, with the cruel vision of youth. They did not hesitate to exploit their guardian's weakness for their own comfort.

Laura said, "Good morning," and sank with a sigh into a chair and looked worse than ever.

"What's the matter with you, dear child? At your age one should not go about looking ill. Look at me, I shall soon be seventy, and I am as well as ever."

And saying this, he relapsed into the soft upholstery of his chair, his face twitching from rheumatism. But this had no effect on Laura.

"I can't help it; I cough and have no appetite. I think I need a change of air."

"Change of air! When do you think I have ever had a change of air in my life? And yet I have never been ill more than three days together in all my life!"

"Everybody can't be as well as you, Uncle. And I am only a girl. Oh! if only Mother were alive so that I might have somebody to talk to."

Laura's voice trembled, and the tears were already in her eyes. Her guardian grew alarmed.

"What's the matter? What do you want to do, then, my dear child?"

Then Laura could restrain her desire no longer.

"I . . . I want to go to a boarding-school . . . in Switzerland. You get such an appetite there. It would do my chest good. Elvira Lähnfeldt at Trefvinge is going to Neuchâtel. Stellan told me so, for he was invited. Neuchâtel is said to be so very suitable. And fancy to be able to talk French properly—and then the air——"

Old Hermansson's horizon did not stretch beyond the frontiers of his own country. He was dumbfounded by the audacity of the proposal.

"Impossible, my dear child, impossible!"

After the first attack Laura collected her forces for a more systematic siege.

"Oh, Uncle, you should live at Selambshof," she wailed; "you would be ill in a week. Yes, it is so unpleasant at home since that dreadful business with Brundin."

Laura glanced at her guardian; she seemed satisfied with the effect, and continued:

"It is worst with Peter. He curses like a farm labourer and he swears at table. He is really no company for a young girl!"

That also had a good effect. Old Hermansson could not bear Peter since he had exposed Brundin. Laura already knew so much about the human heart. The old man nodded pensively.

"I admit that your brother Peter is not all that he ought to be. But if it is not always pleasant at home, you know that you are always welcome at Ekbacken."

"Thank you. You are so awfully kind, both you and Herman. But (Laura flushed beneath her self-induced pallor and glanced archly at her guardian) . . . but . . . it looks strange for me to be always here. I don't know if it is right any longer, and then I thought that both you and Herman would like me to have some sort of education."

Here she was interrupted by an attack of coughing, and she put her hand to her chest with an anxious and sudden air of distraction.

Her guardian looked very perplexed. As a matter of

fact, he looked upon the affection of the young pair for each other with some pleasure. He himself had originally been a poor clerk who had risen to his present position by marrying the daughter of his employer. To him Selambshof and the Selambs still seemed an old distinguished place and family. Yes ; secretly he was even flattered by Laura's walks with Herman. The thought of his future daughter-in-law being in a Swiss boarding-school like the young lady at Trefvinge was also pleasant. So he slowly assumed an expression which was more of anxiety than of opposition.

" Well, my dear child, we must think it over."

Laura had to control herself not to dance for joy so long as she was within sight of Ekbacken. But when she reached home she ate for the first time for a whole month till she was satisfied.

The following weeks were for Laura a time of glowing expectation, blissful faithlessness, touching farewells, and a feeling almost approaching love.

On one of the first days of September, when the air had all the coolness and clearness of autumn, she and Herman were walking through the garden of Selambshof. The garden was situated on the southern slope, between the avenue and the lake, screened by a row of tall ash trees from the dismal, brooding heaviness of the house. It was much neglected, but it was a pleasant sort of neglect, and this was, after all, a little corner of Selambshof where something of an idyll still lingered.

Laura and Herman were strolling slowly along the wet, half-choked paths between currant bushes smothered in weeds and scraggy old apple trees covered with grey moss which still, as if by a miracle, bore beautiful shining apples. Here a tumbled-down fence lay with an appearance of infinite fatigue, and there the pest-weed had pushed up into the light out of a half-smothered ditch, and with its dense growth of enormous leaves had vanquished a row of raspberry bushes, where dry branches stretched up helplessly out of the green sea. Then there was a row of frames with broken glass and a bed of cabbages looking quite blue in the shade. Then came the long beds with a few asters and dahlias in front of the gardener's dilapidated old cottage.

" It is very beautiful here," whispered Laura. There was a note of surprise in her voice. It had evidently never

occurred to her that it might be beautiful here. She glanced sideways at Herman, who looked at once shy and hurt.

"If it is beautiful here why are you going away?"

The sun was not less bright because Herman turned away from her and grumbled. Laura pressed his hand encouragingly.

"I'll soon be back," she whispered softly.

She felt very superior to Selambshof and Herman and all the other everyday things which remained where they were put and never moved. But all the same there was a strange tenderness in her feeling of superiority. Sometimes she did not quite know if it was gay or sad.

Old Johannes, the gardener, sat in his porch and looked tranquilly at the neglect around him. He had been a sailor in his youth and divided his day into watches—four hours he smoked his pipe and four hours he rested. But during the day-watch he slept. But somehow he managed to pay his rent so that he was not driven out. Until to-day Laura had only thought of the old man as something unkempt and dirty. She had never given him a further thought as she munched his apples. But now he suddenly appeared quite nice to her, sitting there in the sunshine. A bumble-bee buzzed lazily round the patches on his trouser-knees. His hands seemed as if made of bark. His whole face was smothered with hair, just as the garden was with weeds. When he scratched his beard with his coarse nail there was a grating sound. But his eyes were wonderfully calm. It was as if in a quiet, still, protected corner the sun were shining down on a barrel of rain-water.

Laura suddenly realised why Tord spent so much time with the gardener.

"How is Tord's fox?" she wondered.

She referred to a fox that had been caught in a trap and which Tord had been allowed to keep. It lived in a shed.

"Tord has got him on the leash," smiled the old fellow, pleased at the interest in their common pet.

The door of a big, grateless room stood open. The floor was covered with fruit. Laura dived in with the gardener and came out with her hat filled with the rosiest apples that ever woman tempted man with. Herman sighed and ate. It was all "sour grapes" to him. He pulled at

Laura's arm. He wanted to be alone with her. He was jealous of the garden, of the gardener, of the Swiss Alps, and of everything.

They moved on.

On the other side there was a hillock with terraces and ledges and some tumbling-down summer cottages. Here everything was silent, mysterious, and abandoned. Laura and Herman walked about in the small, devastated gardens and peeped into the empty rooms where the winter seemed already to have thrown its shadow. Squeezed in between the lake and the hill lay a rambling old house given over to the rooks. It was a high house with three balconies, built over the water and embellished with some extraordinary extensions on the land side. Here the water splashed against the piles, covered with a green ooze, and the aspens, burnt red by the autumn, rustled, and the whole was illuminated by a strange light reflected from the paths covered with yellow leaves.

Herman succeeded in opening the door. Past empty cupboards, garden furniture, and old gate-legged tables covered with marks left by glasses they penetrated to the highest balcony. Here the last flies of autumn buzzed against the window-panes, and tendrils of virginia creeper pushed in through the chinks and cracks.

They sank down on a garden seat strangely moved by this sunny brightness and forlorn melancholy. Herman dug his stick into the floor boards and then he suddenly threw it aside and kissed her. He kissed her passionately and violently with bitter, sealed lips. But she pulled him towards her and opened her lips softly. And she loved to feel how he tried to resist her but was not able to do so. No; humbly and helplessly he clung to her lips. This was their first real kiss. Everything before had been play. And she was going to leave all this behind. She felt so tenderly, so blissfully, so lovingly faithless. The tears came into her eyes and she smiled like a real little angel.

At this moment Laura happened to look out through one of the side windows. Who was that standing far away on the hill, almost on the same level as they were, if not Hedvig? She pretended to be interested in something out on the lake. But the expression of offended loneliness and stern disapproval in her pinched face was not to be mistaken

She had a disagreeable way of stealing upon you, had Hedvig. Of course she had seen everything. Of course she was green with envy because Laura had caught Herman and was going to Switzerland and was not as silly as Hedvig herself.

"So now we shall have her haunting this place," muttered Laura. "Now this jolly place is spoilt for us."

They pulled an old curtain before the window so that Hedvig should see nothing, and then they stole away from the "Rookery" as silently as Indians. Now they are out in the wood on the other side of the avenue, and they kiss each other again but without lingering. A restless longing drove them on. They walked all the way to Träskängen, and when they got there it was almost evening. A cold breeze met them as they jumped about from one dry spot to another.

In the deepest hollow there lay a white mist over banks of reeds and pools. But when they came up again on the other side of the hill towards the quarries it was so hot that they had to stop. In the twilight the scene around them seemed ragged and gloomy and deserted.

It was old Enoch who had started blasting here once upon a time. It seemed as if an evil spirit had ruled the forest, or some barren, destructive fiend. Everywhere there were ravines, caves, treacherous holes, and scree of clattering stones and loose boulders ready to slip away beneath your feet, and everything was enveloped in an almost impenetrable growth of young golden aspen.

And then the autumn moon rose above the forest in the west.

"It really is wonderfully fine," whispered Herman, fascinated by the romance of this desolate wilderness.

"Yes; it is almost like the Alps," answered Laura, and groped for him that she might feel him tremble with jealous love. But as soon as she had said it she trembled herself. Yes, she was playing a dangerous game up there among the rough boulders of Old Hök's overgrown stony wilderness. Laura suddenly felt love clutching her heart with burning fingers. For a moment she gave herself up to this new and painful sensation, but then she became frightened, with the violent fear of a threatened egoism. She jumped up and pushed him away from her.

"No; now I must go home."

But Herman insisted.

"No; we must go up to Enoch's gorge," he panted. "It is haunted, and up to the old quarrymen's shed."

His voice had never sounded so near her, so strangely near. She followed him against her will.

Enoch's gorge was a perpendicular, precipitous gully blasted out of the rock. They held each other's hands and crept up to the edge with their heads swimming. It was dark down below. Fancy if he pulls me down!—the thought flashed through Laura's head, and she suddenly tore her hand out of his.

Then they came to the shed. There were stones in front of the door, but Herman rolled them away. Inside something lay on a couple of overturned empty boxes. In the light of a match they saw a few books, a heap of strange stones, shells, and horses' teeth, a dried-up lizard, and a broken bottle with fish spawn by the side of a half-eaten piece of bread-and-butter.

Then somebody stood in the doorway. It was Tord. He looked unusually tall in the twilight. In spite of his sixteen years he was dressed in breeches and an outgrown sailor blouse, his long wrists sticking out from the sleeves. He stood quite still and stared at the invaders with an expression of fear and anger. And between his legs the fox thrust out his pointed nose and his bright eyes and sniffed. He had only three legs, poor thing—the fourth had been caught in the trap.

"What are you doing here?" growled Tord at last in a thick voice.

Herman and Laura were embarrassed to have been taken unawares, and in their haste resorted to jeers.

Laura pushed some beetles on to Tord's bread-and-butter.

"Here you are—a beetle sandwich!"

Tord turned pale. This was his refuge, his peaceful retreat. Here he had all his trophies from Träskängen, his lonely and glorious hunting-ground for frog spawn, lizards, divers, birds' eggs, and bats—and now his poor secrets were captured by intruders. He stood there swinging his long bare arms. He gave one the impression of a dumb captive creature like the fox beside him. It was as if he could only express his feelings by a shriek. But now he clenched his fist and his face twitched with sudden and violent anger.

"Go away!" he cried. "Get away! This is my place."

"All right! We are going."

Laura dragged Herman with her. In the bushes beside them they heard the flop of a stone that Tord had cast after them. And then he called out something coarse after them, one of those impossible, foul expressions of impotent boyhood. Herman wanted to rush back and thrash him, but Laura stamped her foot on the ground and commanded him to take her home at once. She was suddenly short, cold, and offended, just as if Herman had injured her.

"You are silly," she snapped. "What business had we up in that stupid quarry? Tell me what business we had there!"

In reality, Laura was not in the least angry. She was afraid, and she sought relief for her fear in scolding him. Love had touched the egoism of her heart with a burning finger; and she felt restless in the twilight. That was the reason why she was so anxious to get home.

Poor Herman got no benefit from his kiss that evening. And there were no more kisses before her departure. Laura had suddenly grown careful, prim, and full of moral qualms. Only at the very last, when her ticket was bought and the retreat clear did she recover some of her old amiability and mischief, and deigned graciously to cajole his heart out of his breast, so as to have something to show to the other schoolgirls.

Now she was already standing on the step of the railway carriage with Elvira Lähnfeldt and Manne and his mother, who were also travelling south. Cheerfully and with perfect ease she chatted to everybody. She was radiantly happy, and her happiness made her beautiful. How could she be so happy when Herman was standing there with a void in his breast?

The train started. Her handkerchief was lost in the enveloping white steam.

On the way back to Ekbacken, Herman instinctively joined Stellan. With him the air seemed less oppressive, and it seemed that something of Laura remained after all.

Stellan had not been very often at Ekbacken lately. And if he came it was to scold Laura, who was always there. Sisters are a doubtful blessing when they begin to take your friends away from you.

No, nowadays, Stellan went mostly to Manne at Kolsnäs. He had nobody else to turn to, because Percy was away in Jämtland for the summer on account of his chest. And Stonehill had been sold. Lake Mälare was beginning to be unfashionable, and nice people moved out to the sea. And then the town was creeping nearer and nearer, and it seemed to make the whole landscape look poor and ugly. They were already laying the foundation of a factory close to Stonehill. In those few years the fine place had already begun to look insignificant and neglected. Stellan avoided looking that way when he rowed over to Manne. He had to think of the footman and the horses at Kolsnäs in order not to feel sick of the old lake.

Manne had had a horse given to him in the spring, when he had at last succeeded in squeezing through his matriculation examination. The whole summer had been spent in wild riding. Every second day Manne lent Stellan his black horse, "Sultan," for Manne was always a good friend. He had a kind, open smile and blue, somewhat misty eyes. He had already begun to lose the hair on the top of his head, but that did not prevent him from looking as boyish as ever. Nobody could look so splendidly unaware of the fact that necks can be broken. But his wild careering about was not restlessness. He did not worry about what he was going to be. That was quite superfluous, for his future was written on his face and the shape of his legs. He was a born cavalry officer!

For Stellan the matter was not quite so simple—he was poor, and, besides, confound it! he had brains.

Anyhow, he enlarged his horizon. In company with Manne he sometimes rode across to Trefvinge, the great and magnificent Trefvinge. Stellan had always a strange, cold sensation, a mixture of voluptuous ease and of hatred when his horse carried him across the grand stretch of gravel in front of its great white façade. Trefvinge was a real castle, a famous, historic castle of the seventeenth century. It impressed everybody against their wills, except the owner, Count Lähnfeldt, who had not been born a Count. The lord of the castle himself scarcely ever appeared, but Elvira rode out with them. She was a slender girl with a shrill, commanding voice, especially when she was excited. There was nothing shy about her, and she had

no particularly girlish manners, so she did not spoil sport. None of the young men was in love with her. Stellan used to tease her in a way that was sometimes cold and biting. It was as if he wanted to take his revenge because the castle in which she lived was so shockingly big and aristocratic.

In this way, then, the summer passed, and then Manne got the silly idea of going to Germany with his mother. That Elvira and Laura should go, of course, made no difference to Stellan, but Manne! That was a blow—because of “Sultan.”

Stellan had now nothing but Herman and the sailing-boat to fall back upon. And so after all the wild riding began sailing just as wild. Stellan could not remain still. In the autumn he felt that the cessation of the constraint of school had left a certain emptiness and restlessness. The future worried him.

Herman was with him in the boat. His future was Laura. He had thought of going to an English shipbuilding school in the autumn. But he could not make up his mind. He was caught in the memory of their kisses. He clung to Stellan, her brother. Yes, it was only for Stellan's sake he took part in those chilly autumn sailing trips. He sat there huddled up in the spray and hugged Laura's solitary little letter in his pocket and hoped that her brother would talk of her.

Stellan saw very well that Herman was not living in the same world as himself, and that irritated him. He shrugged his shoulders with a contemptuous pity, which perhaps at bottom was nothing more than the secret envy of the poor. He smiled grim little smiles when he saw Herman's eyes directed towards him with the same expression of supplication. He pressed the helm and conspired with the autumn, the wind, and the lake against this obstinate love. He was happiest when Herman was fully occupied in bailing out the water.

Herman sat by the fore-sheet, and slackened and made fast. Now and then he looked astern at Stellan. There was a mixture of admiration, anxiety, and something akin to secret pity in his look. Stellan wore the same expression now as at school when things were at their hottest—bold, independent, and scoffing. Oh! how Herman had envied him that he never allowed himself to be impressed by his

teachers, that, in spite of his laziness, he always knew how to answer. Ugh! the water dashed in from the lee! But Stellan never condescended to luff up. It was almost terrible to see how indifferent he was. He was quite capable of sinking them. Herman was not afraid for himself. But he felt a pang in his heart. Was there not something strangely forlorn about Stellan? Did he not sit there alone with the wind and the grey lake? It seemed as if poor Stellan had been locked out from something. And he did not even know that he could knock at the door.

These were Herman's thoughts as he clung wet and cold to the weather gunwale, and received the worst spray over his back. For he had a little letter in his pocket to hug furtively.

One day something happened. But this time Herman sat at the helm and not Stellan.

There was a dash of fitful April weather at the beginning of October. The hot sun shone between big clouds, and below were black squalls. It was not rough, but there came treacherous gusts of wind by the dips of the land. And into the bargain it was Saturday.

Old Hermansson's trim little *Ellida* lay for the moment to lee as on a mirror. The sails hung slack, the boat lay over to windward, and the sun was deliciously warm. Slowly they overhauled an absurd little overrigged boat—a real caricature of a boat. It was painted white, and on the stern was painted *Kalle*, in big black letters. Aboard were three working men from the new factory under construction. Their half-drunk bass voices rolled out over the water. One of them stood with his foot on the gunwale, gripping the stays with one hand and flourishing a bottle in the other. Never had the sun shone on such recklessness.

Stellan's eyes flashed.

"This will be interesting," he muttered.

Ellida was now in the shadow of a racing cloud. They stared back at the man with the bottle. They had a sudden horrid sensation of cold in the pit of the stomach. Heigh ho! Then the dark squall came sweeping along. It first struck the small boat. She instantly went round as if by a single turn of the hand of Fate. The three working men had not even time to utter a curse before they were in the water and the boat had sunk.

On the *Ellida*, as I have said before, Herman sat at the tiller. Not for a moment did he think of their own danger. He only wanted to rush to help the drowning men. But in his flurry he put the tiller over to windward instead of to leeward. And in an instant the *Ellida* had the same fate. The whole thing had not taken more than five seconds.

The water was ice cold. The boat disappeared quickly under them. Herman saw Stellan appear beside him. He did not say anything, but began to swim towards land. Herman followed. It was a fair distance, but at last they crawled up amongst the boulders along the shore, stiff and tired out.

"How idiotic!" gasped Stellan. "You don't sail a boat to capsize it!"

But Herman stared, as if suddenly turned to stone, across the lake. It was empty and silent. The water shone green again, with little white crests, in the sun. Only a few floating bulkheads and oars bore witness to the catastrophe. Ashore nobody seemed to have noticed anything.

Herman ran out into the water again up to his waist.

"Help!" he cried. "Help! They are drowning! Help!"

The echo came back from the nearest cliff: "Help! Help!"

Stellan pulled him by the arm.

"There is no use calling. They are where they are. Now let us run home!"

"Drowned! All three! It's dreadful!" moaned Herman.

Then they began to run. At the corner of the avenue, where they must separate to reach their respective homes, Stellan caught hold of his friend's arm again. There were blue and yellow streaks on his face from the soaked lining of his cap, but his expression was both tense and elated.

"Don't forget that we capsized in trying to rescue them," he muttered; "it looks beastly bad otherwise."

That same evening they were sitting out on the long landing-stage by the yard. It was quite calm now. The atmosphere twinkled coldly between the black flocks of cloud. Over the oak trees out on the spit of land the lights of Stockholm lit up the sky. There is always something both of exhortation and menace in the pale radiance in the

sky over an invisible city. Now the crescent moon peeped out over the serried edge of the forest behind Stonehill and threw a few shafts of light over the dark water—the dark water holding the three dead.

Herman was talking of the accident. He could not let the subject drop. He returned time after time to certain points, in order to prove that they could have done absolutely nothing to save the drowning men. There was a note of supplication in his voice as if, nevertheless, he felt remorse. He also shivered secretly.

The world seemed to him gruesome—gruesome but still blessed, because Laura was in it. Her smile was there and so were the cold stars, over the black water. He was sitting beside her brother. Again Herman felt that burning desire to talk of her. But he did not dare; there was something in Stellan's tone that kept him back, that made him vaguely uneasy. And he was too young, too, thought Herman, to understand how different people can be.

Stellan walked up and down the landing-stage. He talked in short, jerky sentences about sailing and riding and sport. He seemed strangely excited. He was one of those who are stimulated by the icy blasts of life. It was as if the dead out there helped him to come to a decision. With complete detachment from all this talk he suddenly came to reflect coolly, clearly, and swiftly on his own future. Life is short and uncertain, he thought. Life is a gamble. It is silly to take it too seriously. I shall be an officer. I shall have a smart uniform. I shall spend my time amidst arms, horses, and smart people. I want to be on top. I shall have excitement, adventures, be in danger, and perhaps go to war. But the money? It is expensive to be an officer. Well, there will always be a way out. I suppose I shall have to use Laura as a lure. Poor Herman has surrendered unconditionally. I can get him to do what I like. He just goes about begging me to trample on him for Laura's sake. He will do the hard work for me with the old man. Anyhow, he can't say "No" to anything, poor old fellow. I'll be an officer all right if I play my cards properly.

Thus it happened that Stellan Selamb found his guiding star one autumn evening. It was a bright, frosty star twinkling keenly over there in the pale, light half over the town—the town that lay thus waiting on the confines of his

childhood's kingdom—the town with the cross lightning of fate and a merciless, consuming fire.

That same evening Laura stood with a bag of sweets in her hand and looked out through a small, half-opened, ground-glass window. She was, with due respect, in the smallest room in the school, a room with a bolt on the inside. She had withdrawn there in order to eat her sweets in peace. If you were to share with all the other girls there would be nothing left for yourself.

Whilst Laura munched sweets her glance strayed up the sloping expanse of roofs and treetops of the town and out over the calm Neuchâtel Lake, which seemed to her as large as a sea, and on to the towering Alps in the distance, whose snow-covered tops soared out of the shadow and silence into the light of a crescent moon of palest silver.

Laura stared, ate, and dreamed. How perfectly lovely! she thought. And she was right. Not even a poster could be more beautiful.

What was Laura dreaming about now in the glow of this eternal snow? Not about silence, the infinite withdrawal from the world, oh no! Laura was dreaming about a long honeymoon—a long, long honeymoon. She was walking on wonderfully soft hotel carpets, she was eating seven-course dinners in luxurious dining-rooms, she was furtively kissing in dark, rumbling tunnels, she was saved by strong arms on the edge of dizzy precipices. And it was, of course, Herman who kissed her in the tunnels and saved her with his strong arms. Of course it was Herman. She never thought of anybody else. It was not at all disagreeable to dream of a long wedding trip with Herman.

But of a home with him she did not dream.

The bag was suddenly empty, and her throat was burning after all the strong-flavoured sweets she had eaten. Laura had to run down and drink a whole bottle of water, and somehow she did not write any letters as she had intended.

IX

PETER THE BOSS

ALREADY at the agricultural school a strange change had begun in Peter Selamb. And it became still more pronounced on his return home. He somehow became more positive. He realised that one cannot go on for ever merely watching and spying on others. It is better to be the object of attention.

Peter wanted to be bailiff at Selambshof, and for that reason he tried to get friends and supporters. Was the spying and grumbling Peter the Watch-dog endeavouring to secure friends like a politician before an election? Was he not doomed to failure? No; because Peter was no longer the same after his victory over Brundin. Fear had thrown a spell upon him. It had made him ugly and repulsive. But now he had somehow broken the enchantment. To the naked eye he seemed almost human. From fear he had passed quite readily to lying—a not uncommon step. Fear is the parent of a real and deliberate mendacity, and somehow it persists under the smiling exterior. As yet Peter did not lie consciously. Alas! the conscious lie is so slight, so harmless, so transparent. No, give me the real, thorough, unconscious lie, especially if it is joined with that particular greed that so often grows up from the deep root of fear. Then we may expect consequences.

As Peter changed, the people round about him also began to change. They were no longer dangerous and malevolent people before whom he had to be on his guard every moment. He began to see them in the light of his desires, and that is also a light of its kind. He found to his surprise that these people, formerly so unreliable, not unwillingly allowed themselves to be manœuvred to his advantage. Sometimes they seemed to move round him like mutes in a play, in which Peter Selamb was the hero, and which play must

end with his enrichment and aggrandisement. But do not suppose that Peter grew proud, extravagant, or reckless. No, he took good care not to awaken any dangerous fear in others. Quite instinctively, and only to hide his real self, he gradually grew more and more good-natured, pleasant, and cheerful. It cost him no effort, because he felt he would earn money by it. Yes, even his body assumed something of his cunning, and grew and expanded about the chest and stomach in order to remove all angles and give him a more trustworthy appearance, so that he might the more easily achieve his end. Peter never looked so pleased as when some one joked with him about his getting fat.

The first indication of Peter's new frame of mind was that of learning to play "vira." He made a third with the bailiff Inglund, and old Lundbom from the yard.

As a matter of fact, Peter had never been on a really bad footing with the new bailiff. Inglund was an experienced farmer, but obstinate, and averse to everything new. He was fond of his ease, the type of man who has worked his whole life for low wages for other people. He did not love authority, and was not unwilling to divide his responsibility. He did not mind Peter shadowing him under the pretence of helping him. He liked to teach whatever he knew of his trade. "Next time I can send the boy and need not go myself," was his thought. And then he would remain on his sofa smoking his pipe and smiling at silly Peter, who ran his errands. Meanwhile, Peter's knowledge grew daily, and as he advanced with rapid strides to his position of authority he became more and more indispensable. And both were satisfied.

Thus Peter played "vira" with Inglund and Lundbom. With what an agreeable feeling of dangers overcome did he not sit there in the bailiff's quarters, smoking and drinking, and sending forth his orders from these seats of power and knowledge. This was different from roaming about in the dark outside, hungry, lonely, and frightened. Peter enjoyed the old men's calm and circumstantial way of talking and telling stories. It was somehow informed with a superior and yet harmless and benevolent worldly wisdom. And one could still feel one's superior strength. Warmed by his grog, Peter sat smiling contentedly, and drank in their golden lore of the changing nature of the earth and the varying

seasons and the strange ways of money among the labyrinths of the law. And all the time he saw visions of future wealth in the thick clouds of tobacco smoke.

Like all new-beginners Peter had, of course, shamelessly good luck. But he did not become disagreeably smug or unpleasantly overweening. That was a great feature in his character. He tried to moderate his good luck in order to be tolerated in the company. And soon he had become quite a shrewd and skilful player.

Peter never regretted having learnt to play "vira." The cards soon proved an excellent means of communication with useful people. The gatherings in the bailiff's rooms soon had some offshoots in town. Peter accompanied the bailiff to cheery drinking and card parties with business friends, both buyers and sellers. Thus it was by the paths of rye, potatoes, and bacon that Peter penetrated into the town. Here Peter recognised among many new faces some of the old ones from Brundin's great crayfish party. They were all men of seventeen stone, with heavy fists and well-filled purses. But they no longer pressed Peter down to the ground. On the contrary, he felt a solemn exhilaration mingled with hopeful expectation as he sat among these bulging pocket-books. And whilst he arranged his cards and watched his play, he kept his eyes and ears open, learned the correct jargon, studied the market, and did not lose a thread in the skein of business names and connections. During all this time there often came over him the dreamy expression of one who stops in his walk to listen to the rush of a still invisible cataract. It was the rolling of money that Peter heard in the noise of the streets, which is so unfamiliar to country folk. The town to him meant money, the money that would one day roll into Selambshof and fall into Peter's pockets.

But let us return to the bailiff's rooms and see Peter's second adversary. Old Lundbom, who was an expert in the difficult game of "misère," sat muttering, with his spectacles slipping down over his nose and his extinguished cigar stuck into a gap in his front teeth. From him, too, Peter could derive much useful knowledge. As a managing clerk he knew not only the recognised forms of business and the ways of money and the setting forth of it in columns with figures and names, he was also secretly a keen

amateur lawyer, was this old nutcracker. The law of Sweden, text-books of civil law, reports of law cases and judgments constituted his favourite reading in his spare time. Once started on that subject he was difficult to stop. It was with a peculiar enjoyment that Peter heard him tell of long and involved lawsuits in which large sums had changed hands. To Peter's simple understanding the law was nothing else but a collection of all the tricks that could be used to get hold of other people's money. Old Lundbom would have been very perplexed in his unselfish complacency if he had seen how greedily Peter picked up any information that might possibly be of use to him on some future day.

One evening—it was, as a matter of fact, a fine and calm evening in the beginning of July and the hay had just been got in—the usual trio sat playing by the light of a lamp out in the porch. Then Peter suddenly heard something which made him think hard. Old Lundbom was speaking about a business that had to be sold at a great loss after the death of the owner because one of the heirs was a minor and had to receive his inheritance in trustee stock.

Here at Selambshof both Laura and Tord were minors ! And their father had lain in bed for half a year past. If he died now—how could Peter become bailiff ?

Peter tried in vain to lure Lundbom into a discussion of the case of Selambshof. He could not force a direct question over his lips. He was somehow afraid to give himself away, and his old lurking fear beset him again in this stupid, meaningless fashion. It would have been quite natural for him to ask questions about the future risks of the estate. But then we all have such fits. . . .

That night Peter lay sleepless. Selambshof was once more a besieged fortress. Even Brundin's ghost haunted the drab silence. A sad relapse. . . .

As early as four o'clock he put on his trousers and stole to his father. The old man was put away in a small room by himself far away on the ground floor towards the north. In former days the soiled linen had been kept there. Oskar Selamb had now overlived his time seventeen years. There must, after all, have been something in old Enoch's toughness and vitality. But last Christmas he had been ill for some time, and since then he had never troubled to get up again. He thought it more comfortable in bed. Now he

lay there, with his chin in the air and his long, grey beard in waves over the sheet. He did not snore at all. A spider came out of a corner and ran quickly over the counterpane. Was the old man dead? Peter started, and stole with trembling limbs up to the bedside. No! Oskar Selamb lay awake, staring with his bleared, grey eyes at the brown, *damp stains on the ceiling.*

"How are you, father?" Peter said anxiously.

The old man's voice was as rusty as if it had not been used for years.

"Been running," he muttered, pointing at the damp stains.

"But I asked how you were, father?"

Hedvig occupied the room next door, and it was she who nursed the old man. She insisted on doing it. Now her father pointed with his thumb to her room.

"Up?" he wondered anxiously.

"But I wanted to know how you felt, father?"

"Must not wash me," whined Oskar Selamb. "Cold water!—don't wash me! . . ."

Then Hedvig suddenly stood in the door. She was dressed in a torn old dressing-gown. Her black hair was brushed tight over the temples and hung over her shoulders in a long, shining plait, which looked as if it had been plaited by hard, mean fingers. She was still pale with a strange, deathly pallor, and her dark eyes were awake, as intensely awake as if the sweet drops of sleep had never been poured into them.

"What's the matter now?"

She spoke in a tone as if she had been lying reproaching herself the whole night.

Peter felt uncomfortable. Did people not sleep in this house of a night? He did not particularly like to see Hedvig. Brundin's shadow hung over her still. She was like a ghost from the time of his great fear. "And then she was religious. She had a sort of secret understanding with the gods, of which Peter in his innermost heart was still rather frightened. Yes, however one approached her, one seemed to be burnt up. But all the same Peter managed the business splendidly. He resembled a man playing ball with a live coal which is still too hot to hold for long in his hand. Though frightened himself, he directed her fear into a channel where there might slumber things of use to Peter Selamb."

"I woke up and felt so anxious about father," he muttered. "I felt as if something was going to happen to him."

"Do you think I am not listening?" Hedvig said, shrugging her shoulders.

"We have not always been as we ought to be to poor father," sighed Peter.

Hedvig's beautiful face hardened, and she assumed the expression of an injured martyr.

"Don't I wear myself out for him? Haven't I nursed him day and night since he has been confined to his bed?"

Peter was not quite convinced that her nursing was so tender. When he thought of lying ill and being washed by Hedvig's hands, he felt cold shivers down his back. But he took care not to show it.

"Yes, Hedvig, you are a real saint. But Laura and Stellan, who never come to see father—and I who—yes, we shall get our punishment."

Over Hedvig's face there spread a glimmer of satisfaction.

"What kind of punishment will that be?"

"Oh, father might die, for example. Do you know what would happen if father died before Tord is of age? They would sell the estate for an old song and we should become paupers. But if we can keep it we are sure to be well off, all of us."

Peter said no more. He only sighed, and then he went back to his room to recover his lost sleep.

That same day old Selamb was moved up into a big, light, and airy room, facing east. Peter spied on Hedvig and received several proofs that his words had taken effect. She was evidently frightened, for secretly she redoubled her efforts. Enviously and with a look of silent reproach to the whole world she watched incessantly over her father. With a sort of gloomy, obstinate determination she wore herself out with her cares.

Peter's own worry was agreeably relieved. He felt that he had given the matter into good hands. Sister Hedvig was now to be numbered among the many who struggled in the cause of Peter Selamb.

Peter had a habit of stealing in to glance at the old man now and then. It was quite edifying to see him lying there washed and brushed between white sheets in the sparkling

sunshine. Peter felt something of the pleasure of the merchant who goes to his safe and turns over his gilt-edge securities. One day Peter brought a bunch of flowers in his hand. Flowers in Peter's hand! That was, of course, a piece of pure superstition, the offer of a bribe to the Powers. His expression was strange, for he was probably afraid of being found out. But as nobody was in the room he put the flowers quickly into a glass and placed them on the bed-table. Then he stood there quite a long while with his head on one side, and he felt quite moved.

After that there were almost always flowers in the glass when Peter came. Yes, Hedvig had also begun to pick flowers. And they did not wither in her hand. No, they looked perfectly fresh and bright on the bed-table. But all the same there was a kind of suspicious aversion in her movements, and she did not like to look at them. It was all so new and strange. One would scarcely have recognised the old Selambshof. A stranger coming in for a few days only would have thought that he was moving amongst the angels.

The only one who did not like the change was old Selamb. He had grown accustomed to the dim light, the dirt, the knocks, and sour faces. This quiet, bright room worried him in some way. Into his dull brain some thought of illness and death must have penetrated when he found himself treated like a feeble invalid. He followed Hedvig's silent movements with suspicious glances. He was stubborn, whined, and indulged in foolish little pinpricks and impotent acts of spite, all of which she suffered with a secret joy as adding spice to her martyrdom. But the old man's hate was especially directed towards the flowers, that strange innovation that smelt of a funeral. One day the glass was empty and he pointed with a grin under the bed. He had thrown them into the bedchamber.

And so that was the end of the flowers, and indeed there could never be flowers for long within the four walls of Selambshof. Peter was not very disappointed. One can't always be sentimental. Moreover, during subsequent "vira" parties Peter had made further inquiries and now knew more. The matter would not be so hopeless even if his father did die. But he took good care not to tell Hedvig. There was no harm in being careful.

It now only remained to enlist old Hermansson in the company of those who lived and worked for Peter Selamb. He felt that this was where the shoe pinched. But though he loitered about Ekbacken he still refrained from approaching the old man. He came over to consult his guardian about the management of the estate. He did not directly complain of the bailiff, but he managed to convey discreetly that the bailiff spent most of his time lying on his sofa, smoking his pipe. But still the old man did not grasp his excellent idea of dismissing Inglund and making the capable and conscientious Peter bailiff.

However much Peter pondered over the matter he could not guess why old Hermansson was so distant and on his dignity towards him, whilst he yet seized every occasion to show his fatherly interest in Stellan. That lazy, supercilious Stellan who strutted about in his uniform and sneered and looked important when he occasionally came home after his idiotic drill. Peter had an economic contempt for everything in uniform, which showed how simple he was, and how much he still had to learn from life. If he had only observed old Hermansson a little more closely, as with his head held high and his hand inside the lapel of his coat he strutted up and down the avenue by the side of Stellan with his glittering braid and sword belt, he would perhaps have understood a good deal better.

Everything striking and challenging stirred Peter's egoism, though it still sought to hide itself.

Whilst he scratched his head a thought flashed through his brain: "If I could think of something sufficiently mad, perhaps it would work better," he thought, and soon after he conceived the brilliant idea that was to bring matters to a successful issue.

After weeks of careful preparation he marched off one day to Ekbacken. It was a fine windy day in May, and down at the repairing slip they were just fitting out Herman's fine new cutter. Herman himself was standing on the pier dressed in the uniform of the Royal Yacht Club, and gave orders to a crowd of lazy-looking youths who had succeeded the old sailors. Peter shook his head as he passed. It positively hurt him to see such expensive toys.

In the smoke-room at Ekbacken a card-table and an easy-chair were placed between the Marieberg stove and a

new piece of furniture, a mahogany and glass monstrosity containing coloured silk ribbons and the gilt insignia of all the secret societies in which the owner of the house held high rank. There old Hermansson now sat playing Patience.

"What do you want here, my friend?" muttered the old man without looking up from his cards.

"Well, there was something I had to tell you. You know that it is a very long time since Father said anything rational. But to-day when I went in to see him as usual he seemed to have brightened up. He fumbled after my hand and then he said: 'You must go and thank my old friend. You must go and thank old William for all he has done for old Selambshof.' Yes, that's what he said. And I felt so strange, because it was just as if Father would not have long to live. That was all I wanted to tell you."

His guardian looked up from his cards with an expression of solemn sympathy and quiet reproach.

"Well, well, did he really say that, dear old Oskar? Yes, it really does me good to hear that there are still some people who are grateful. I will go and see him as soon as possible."

Peter went home contented. A visit was exactly what he wished for. The following day old Hermansson came. It evidently affected him to see the invalid. Much moved and very solemn he walked up to the bed.

"Good morning, dear old Oskar!"

Old Selamb grunted something in his beard. He did not seem specially pleased at the meeting.

"How are things with you, old friend? I am ashamed that I have not been to see you for such a long time."

The invalid was still not interested. Peter had to intervene.

"It's William. Don't you see, Father, that it is William who has been so good to us all?"

"Yes, Oskar, you recognise old William, don't you?"

Old Selamb seemed to be growing impatient. He looked critically at his old friend.

"Seedy," he muttered—"damned seedy!"

Peter did not like the turn the conversation had taken. He suddenly sat down on the edge of the bed with his back to old Hermansson. Then he looked his father full in the eyes, touched his pocket, and showed the corner of a paper bag.

Then the invalid's face suddenly assumed a keen, wide-awake, and almost human expression, and he stretched out a trembling hand to his son.

"Peter . . . look after . . . estate," he muttered in his deep, rusty voice. "Peter shall manage the estate. . . ."

"Now he seems to be getting excited again," whispered Peter to old Hermansson. "It is dangerous for him to get excited. But he usually calms down if he gets something to chew."

Peter took some crumbs of cheese out of the paper bag and gave them to his father, who devoured them with avidity and then sank into his usual apathy again.

Old Hermansson stood in deep thought. Here lay the sick friend of his youth on the bed he would never leave. In a lucid moment he first sends a touching greeting, and then when he came to see him his reason once more flashes up and he begs help for his first-born. It was almost like a command from the grave.

Peter's guardian seized his hand and pressed it warmly.

"Old Oskar shall be obeyed," he said; "you shall manage Selambshof!"

Peter, alarmed and startled, protested, but the old man was firm.

"You and none else," he said in a tone that suffered no contradiction.

Then he went home to his Patience again.

Peter had succeeded by a clever use of his father's insatiable greed for old cheese with caraway seeds in it. Day after day he had been sitting there on the edge of the bed tempting him with a piece of cheese in his hands, till the old man learnt the formula that opened the gates of joy to him.

It is generally the boldest and stupidest tricks that succeed. Peter never forgot the caraway cheese. He used it, as a matter of fact, throughout his life.

Thus half a year later Peter became manager at Selambshof. He had developed quickly. He began as a coarse, lumbering, hulking hireling. But this massive foundation was concealed by a certain smiling good temper and maudlin sentimentality which was rather misleading to those who were not warned by the quick flashes in his cunning bear's eyes.

It was at this point that the first-born of the family got

the nickname "Peter the Boss," a name which stuck to him all his life and under which he was known in wide circles.

Thus Peter the Boss now sat enthroned in the office at Selambshof. Now he wandered in the perfection of his power through the domains of Selambshof, controlled only by Peter the Boss himself. But he did not swagger. He did not become an absolute tyrant as old Enoch had been in his time. He did not worry people too much. He only had a habit of turning up grinning on the most unexpected occasions. You never knew where you had him. There was no possibility of pilfering as in Brundin's time. Peter was content with that. His desire was not power, but possession. There were many things he reflected upon, but always from the point of view of "yours" or "mine," preferably "mine." And then slowly he began to walk in Brundin's footsteps. But without the boldness and rashness of that "fairy prince." He felt his way carefully. He left no traces. He began with modest schemes. He joked his way through, so that you never knew when you had him until you suddenly found you had agreed to something after a jolly evening with cards and drink. One of the old customers of the estate, for instance, wanted potatoes at the old price, which was really too low. Peter laughed at him. But when they sat down to cards, he said he would be damned if he shouldn't have the potatoes if he won that night. In this way Peter recovered half the difference of price, and the matter was settled in the early morning. Peter pretended that he settled the business whilst in his cups, and the other was welcome to think he had got the better of Peter. Or perhaps some cab proprietor wanted to buy hay. There was a scarcity of hay that spring—but not at Selambshof. This was a fine chance for Peter. He snapped out a very high price. The proprietor offered two-thirds. Business seemed impossible. But as they sat there hobnobbing with each other they began to argue about the height of the Eiffel Tower. Peter maintained it was 300 metres high. If he had not just been reading about it he would not have mentioned it. The cab proprietor doubted it.

"All right, let us lay a wager," said Peter. "All right," replied the cab proprietor. "A thousand Kroner," said Peter, and winked. But the cab proprietor became thoughtful. "I am like a little child when I have won a wager,"

grinned Peter. The cab proprietor made a rapid calculation and then agreed to the bet in the cloud of smoke. And Peter won the bet and the cab proprietor got the hay at his own price. So you see that even the Eiffel Tower has its uses.

In this way much business was done in the good old times.

Soon there was not a single turnip sold but Peter the Boss managed in some cunning way or other to exact his toll. The money came rolling in, and he already had a nice little banking account.

But conscience! Did not Peter understand that this was bad faith towards his principals? Did he not think it ugly to rob his brothers and sisters in this way? No; when it came to the point Peter did not think of principals or brothers and sisters or anything at all in that way. The whole thing was a matter between himself and Brundin. Peter was taking his revenge on Brundin, that was all. He beat the nightmare of his childhood on his own ground. So strange are our victories sometimes. Peter felt a delightful relief after each successful coup, a relief that was almost related to a good conscience.

Meanwhile Peter the Boss grew fatter and more good-tempered and jovial. He patted Isaksson, the housekeeper, on the back and lent Stellan, who was always in a tight corner, money with pleasure. Then he offered punch, and with his customary luck won the whole lot back from him again, so that Stellan had to write an IOU for the double amount, for he had to have the money. Stellan rose, shrugging his shoulders, when he had written it and looked contemptuously at his elder brother.

"Just like the Jews," he said in his sneering voice. "Hang it all, Peter, you do look common! It is so under class to become bloated with spirit!"

"Dear, oh dear!" said Peter in his softest voice, "didn't you notice that before you began to play?"

It is true that Peter drank a good deal. Spirit and business melted together with him so that he could not distinguish one from the other. That was why he always drank with a good conscience and grew fat with a good conscience. Because in Sweden in those days it was still easier for fat people to do business than for thin.

If Peter could think of nothing else he used to put a bottle in his pocket and march down to Tord, who now lived in the "Rookery," with all his crows and snakes and foxes. He was a queer fish, Tord, but he was always good enough to drink a glass with. In school he had made himself impossible long ago, but instead of school he sat at home reading a lot of bulky old volumes, and amongst the working people of the estate he was the object of a certain superstitious reverence on account of his strange ways and his learning. Then one day he flung the books on the floor and decided to turn painter—animal painter. That was after he had taken in another inmate, a two-legged one this time, a mysterious creature who seldom appeared in daylight, but who passed for an artist—a real artist from the Academy. His name was Eklund, and he was an incurable Bohemian, contemptuous of the world, and cynical. Nobody knew where Tord had caught this fish, but it was probably in some ditch on the outskirts of the town. Anyhow, he was now going to teach Tord to paint animals.

Yes, Tord was a queer fellow who, sooner or later, would be sure to go to the dogs; but nobody would be any the poorer for that, at least not Peter, so he could always drink a glass with him in anticipation of the catastrophe. And that strange creature Eklund did not spoil things either. It tasted rather good to drink with such impossible fellows. Tord did not, of course, talk much—he usually sat and stared. But with Eklund one could discuss the profoundest problems, if only he had enough inside him. He was one of those radical devils who believe neither in heaven nor hell. Peter protested with inimitable sentimentality against his acid cynicism, but secretly he enjoyed it. In his inmost heart he had a feeling it somehow sanctioned his little tricks. . . .

About that time the guardian of Selambshof died.

Old Hermansson had of late been so unnaturally sound that he could not have long to live. And one morning he could not get out of his bed. He had died during the night from paralysis of the heart.

At the funeral in the little granite church Herman sobbed between his two old aunts, his only relations. But Peter clung instinctively to his sister Hedvig. This was something in her line, he thought. Here she held the direct connections. Far away from the cynicism of Eklund, Peter

the Boss stood there anxiously wondering if this business would not bring him some profit in its train. And had he not been kind to his own aged, sick father, and had him removed into a better room, and seen to it that he had the best care? Yes, there in the church Peter was still making his little efforts to cheat the Almighty. But out here, beside the open grave, he grew unctuous. It was no longer cowardice in face of the last judgment. That was an exquisite refuge when compared with the dark hole in front of him. Before the grave every man is shaken, down to his most elementary instincts. Peter the Boss ate ashes at the thought of creeping down there away from everything that he possessed and would possess. Fancy having nothing more, absolutely nothing! He stood there, pale and ill, with his hat in his hand, and gulped down the lump in his throat like a fish out of water. He would willingly have sacrificed a whole year's salary if he could have got away from it all.

At last he sat in his carriage and rolled away from death's domains into those of Selambshof. His sickness disappeared by and by. He felt with a feverish sigh how business was resuming its normal sway over his thoughts. But still he was like a man who, after a dangerous sea voyage, feels the movement of the sea even though he is walking on the green earth.

There was a dinner at Ekbacken. To everybody's amazement Peter rose and made a speech. After the day's emotions he was very sentimental. Oh, how delightful it was to let himself go and to be moved by, and grateful for, everything, and to be filled with great, beautiful, and solemn emotions! There were no bounds to the greatness and noble philanthropy of old Hermansson and to what they all had to thank his noble, generous heart for. Peter then turned to the only son of this great and noble man. He did not need to describe what Herman was suffering at that moment. But he must not feel himself alone in the world. Everybody present suffered with him. And if it was hard for Herman to throw himself at once into business in the midst of his grief, he must never forget that Selambshof lay next door to old Ekbacken. A helping hand from Peter Selamb would not be lacking when required. . . .

Peter had tears in his eyes. He was wholeheartedly a "helping hand." His emotion was almost genuine, and he

felt that his tears watered soil of which he might himself reap the harvest.

Herman had never liked Peter, but had rather avoided him. But now he had no power of resistance. Childishly ashamed of his own tears, he sought cover behind those of Peter. He believed him, because just now he felt the need of belief in somebody. And there was nobody else to hand. Stellan was so strangely silent and cold just now. He was somehow not made to be a consoler. But Peter overwhelmed him by his rhapsodies, helpfulness, and his massive vitality overflowing with life and animation. There were not many moments when he left Herman alone during the following days. And he used to talk about Laura. It helped Herman in the bitter loneliness that fastened upon his still unguarded soul. Twice Laura had been allowed to go back to her boarding-school. And hitherto she had to a certain extent been right when she thought that both she and Herman were too young to get married. But now she was to stay at home, said Peter. He had telegraphed her on the day of the death of Herman's father, and could not understand why she had not come back already. Did she really deserve such a husband as Herman, such a jolly good fellow, heir to an honourable name and a substantial fortune? And so Peter's thoughts turned to money again. Did Herman fully realise how rich he was? Ekbacken—oh, it had immense possibilities! Peter saw them, because he had already had business experience. And, as he had said before, he would help Herman in word and deed now; when everything had to be cleared up after the death of his father.

Everything went as Peter wished. He became administrator of the estate of the late timber merchant and ship-builder, William Hermansson. A week ago he would have shaken his head at such a possibility. Now, the thing was almost obvious.

Old Lundbom had to supply the necessary expert knowledge. He was so touched and so flattered when Peter came and wanted to make him guardian over his father, that he willingly sacrificed his evening hours to clear up all difficulties of the administration. He had managed Ekbacken's business practically alone during recent years—but without having asked for a penny's increase of salary. The old man

had never realised that one might be clever on one's own account too. He was a servant and nothing but a servant. And now, in the midst of his sincere grief at the death of his beloved old master, he took a childish pleasure in seeing his knowledge of law being put into practice on such an important occasion.

The winding-up of the estate was entirely Lundbom's work. It gave Peter a very interesting insight into the affairs of Ekbacken and six thousand crowns into the bargain. At first he made a few diffident attempts to refuse the money that Herman pressed on him. Herman was flushed with excitement and very stiff in the back. Had not the estate shown more than three hundred thousand crowns assets? Then he supposed he could afford to pay a friend for his solicitude and care. Peter gave in in good time, and put the cheque in his pocket with a sigh.

"Thank you, dear Herman! We Selambs are, unfortunately, too poor to say no!"

When this matter was settled they walked about a long time on the estate discussing the future of Ekbacken. Herman wanted to give up building barges, and instead wanted to build racing yachts of a type that had just won through. It was a high-class and interesting quality-work. He would build his own boats and compete for prizes just as people kept racehorses in their stables. It would be a fine advertisement, and would perhaps interest Laura.

Peter looked thoughtful but did not contradict him.

They came out on to the high road, which was dusty and worn out by the constantly increasing traffic. The heaps of road metal and the stone-cutters' sheds were drawing nearer the old oaks. The town was grinding the hills around it to powder. Soon the last grey granite fortress of Ekbacken would fall. But Herman swore that he would defend his own idyllic home. There were already plenty of people who came to him and wanted to buy sites for factories. But his father's old Ekbacken must not be split up and spoilt in that way.

Peter still did not contradict him. He was absorbed in deep thought. Suddenly he warmly pressed his future brother-in-law's hand.

"You are a fine fellow, Herman. Damn me, but you are a fine fellow!"

After this Peter the Boss stalked homewards—with the first great cheque of his life in his pocket he stalked homewards this cold, still evening in spring. He felt strangely cool about his forehead, and sometimes he felt as if he were treading on air. Strange how everything played into his hands! By making Lundbom guardian he ruled absolutely at Selambshof. Through Laura he would soon be able to control Ekbacken. And the town with its thousand possibilities crept nearer and nearer with every hour.

X

LAURA'S MARRIAGE

FOR more than two years Laura had been at a boarding-school in Neuchâtel. She had been home a few times, at Christmas and Midsummer, but soon she had contrived to get away again. It was quite amusing to meet Herman for a week or two. And it was awfully nice to have him to think of in lonely and sentimental moments. But she was afraid to bind herself to him quite definitely.

"We can't marry yet, of course," she said, "and then it is better not to wear out each other's feelings."

It was always so delightful to say good-bye to Herman. His grief did her good. There was always a faithful heart waiting for her whilst she flew out into the wide world.

And it may even have happened that Laura cried a little in the train.

But it was always with the happiest laughter and the most excited talk that she rushed back to her school friends. And she was greeted with delighted shouts of welcome. For though she had no real friend, she was liked by all. They never grew tired of ruffling her unusual fair hair, which, in the general opinion, was frightfully pretty. She was the obvious leader whenever they wanted to throw dust in the eyes of the poor teachers on returning home too late after walks or after mysterious expeditions in the dense garden of an evening. With a mixture of fear and unwilling admiration the good German teachers nicknamed her "Die blonde Lüge."

Had Laura so much to lie about, then? Well! perhaps a little flirtation with the students in the town. But nothing serious. As a matter of fact, Laura was very careful—much more careful than one would have believed if one had been allowed to read her diary, written in profoundest secrecy. For there she exaggerated and romanced in a most charming manner, and seized every opportunity to make herself in-

teresting to herself. Yes, she falsified her own memoirs quite gaily and airily. All of which your moralist would no doubt consider the height of mendacity, but after all it does not signify very much when you are at boarding-school.

"Dic blonde Lüge" had nothing to do with a certain little Polish lady who was packed off because she came home much too late one evening . . . and who received the following morning a parcel containing neither more nor less than her corsets.

That was a great and mysterious event, which became the subject of endless whispered conversations when the light was turned out in the evenings.

But then there came a telegram and a letter, saying that old Hermansson was dead, and that she must go home. Then Laura felt at once that the best thing she could do was to fall seriously in love with her faithful Herman. And, strange to say, it was not at all so difficult to say good-bye to Neuchâtel as she had thought it would be. The prospect of meeting Herman alone, free, and independent was quite agreeable to her. Strange, but it actually seemed as if old Hermansson had, in spite of all his kindness, stood between her and Herman. Now she really enjoyed indulgence in all the romantic sentiments of her diary.

Before Laura left, the idea came to her that she would become properly engaged to Herman at a distance. This they did, and they exchanged rings by post. It was the sentimental idea of a schoolgirl, conceived in order to impress the other girls and to make a brilliant exit.

And so Laura at last returned home to make ready for the great wedding trip with the luxurious hotels and shops and the tunnels and moonlight nights. She sat there in the train and grew more sure of her love for Herman. She felt a real thrill when she saw him on the platform—a delicious thrill straight through her heart. He looked so awfully handsome, refined, and serious in his tall hat and mourning band, one could not really wish for a better companion on a wedding trip.

Herman wanted the wedding to take place in the autumn. One could not have the wedding immediately after the funeral.

Summer came, a delightful summer of sunshine, and

Herman was pleasant, devoted, and chivalrous. There was nothing but flowers and admiration and knightly courtesy. They were out sailing a great deal in Herman's fine new cutter, which, of course, was called *Laura*. Herman himself had designed the boat and expected a lot from it. He was known as "the engineer" at the yard. He had spent a couple of years at the School of Technology, but he had left it because he was dissatisfied with the instruction. Now he was sitting there holding the tiller, tall, slim, and sun-burnt, wearing the uniform of the Royal Yacht Club, which was also very becoming. And Laura lay in a white sweater and white yachting shoes in the sunshine on deck, and thought it was good that he sat and kept a look out with his faithful blue eyes whilst the ship of their lives elegantly lacked into the brilliant future.

Herman entered the boat for several races. Unhappily, owing to a series of annoying accidents, such as bad luck with the wind and small breakdowns, he was unable to win a prize. But, anyhow, there was open-air dancing afterwards and a regatta, with Chinese lanterns and fireworks. And Laura came home quite excited with dancing and wine and the sound of lapping water in a blue darkness full of kisses and the sound of clinking glasses and songs and hearty curses and bright, sinuous reflections and sudden bouquets of light shooting up above the edge of the forests.

Laura was really unreservedly happy during this period. It seemed as if the happy, care-free years down in a southern atmosphere had set fire to her and thawed her. She had acquired a certain sweetness that was unusual under the skies of Selambshof. During these summer months it seemed as if Selambshof had lost its power over her. She hovered laughingly around the coarse and greedy imp, Peter the Boss. She smiled at Hedvig's bitter, stiff, and offended airs. She moved like a happy and contented stranger in and out of this dreary, malevolent house, where the former naughty Laura had once sat drinking vinegar in order to escape into the world.

Laura was just twenty years old. The particular kind of egoism that comes from bad nerves was completely alien to her. She blossomed out under kisses, which had not yet become the serious business of life. It was her season of roses. All the good elements in her nature had their great

opportunity. Would this soft, mellow, rose perfume penetrate to the core of her being? Where there is a fund of health there are always possibilities. Things had never looked so promising.

Laura had taken it into her head that they would take a flat in town. The idea was constantly in her mind. What supreme comfort it would be to live amongst restaurants, shops, and theatres, with plenty of pin-money! She begged and implored Herman, but on this point he was really immovable. He felt it would be treason to his dead father to leave Ekbacken. And lo! Laura yielded like a good child. She even liked him because he knew his own mind.

She also gave in on another point. She had dreamed that they would start on their great wedding trip at once. But Herman, who had a dispute with the town concerning shore rights to attend to, had to wait till the spring, when the matter would be regulated. He had to defend his dead father's old Ekbacken. He seemed to gather strength from the mourning band on his sleeve.

If only that strength had survived a little longer. . . . The wedding-day came nearer and nearer.

Stellan came home from the summer manœuvres, brought his heels together with a slight click of his spurs, and greeted his pretty sister with ironical politeness. He had grown into a witty and elegant young officer. The uniform was exactly the right mask for his easy cynicism and light irony. Now he kissed Laura's hand.

"So you're going to get married?" he said. "And you're sticking to your old lake. What an idyll, my dear Laura."

Laura snatched her hand away shyly. She somehow could not answer with a smile. Stellan made quite another impression on her than on the others at Selambshof. He was the real brother of the old, naughty Laura. Her love was in some way afraid of him. Yes; she was also afraid on Herman's account. Quite instinctively Laura did all she could to avoid Stellan during the next days, though it was he who had undertaken all the arrangements for the wedding.

Now the morning of the wedding had arrived. Laura came for the last time out of the room in which she had slept as a little girl. She left it without regrets. Selambshof had never been a home. She remembered how lonely she

had been these last days. Nobody had sat by her bedside the last night and talked late in whispers far into the night. She was not afraid. One could not be afraid of Herman. No ; but she had been lying in her bed longing to have at least a little letter from a school friend to read.

As Laura walked down the passage she suddenly heard Stellan's voice in the smoking-room. It must have been Peter he was talking to, because the replies sounded like coarse mutterings. She was just stealing past the door to find Hedvig, for to-day she felt a strange aversion to meeting her brothers alone. But then something made her stop and listen. She heard her own name and Herman's pronounced. "Laura . . . she . . . will be able to twist the poor boy round her little finger. . . ."

It was Stellan's voice—curiously penetrating—like drinking iced water. Then she heard Peter mumble in a thick voice, expressive at one and the same time of satisfaction and discontent :

"There are sure to be difficulties in the long run with Ekbacken—not a business man at all."

Laura heard no more, for somebody had begun to hammer in the hall. For a moment she stood motionless. She felt a little sick from the smell of freshly scrubbed floors, which lingered in the dark passage. She suddenly felt the oppressiveness of the high, dismal house again. For a fraction of a second a strange sensation of being in some way cheated shot through her. Then she became angry—exceedingly angry with Stellan and Peter. But she said nothing ; she did not go in to them, but hurried back to Ekbacken to greet Herman and convince herself that he was still the same. She remained there so long that he grew anxious lest she should not have time to dress for the wedding.

Then the guests began to arrive. Stellan had managed to collect quite a fair number of fine folk. The dowager from Kolsnäs and her son were there. Lähnfeldt's elegant carriage drove up to the door. But Perçy Hill was abroad and was only represented by the fine old Dutch master he had sent as a wedding present. Peter's contribution was a collection of the wealthiest customers of Selambshof. Herman had very few relatives left, except the two old aunts, who had been at the funeral and who looked very shy and plain.

Hedvig demonstratively put on a dark, severe-looking

frock, and she spread a chill around her. Tord was not there. He did not go to bourgeois parties.

The marriage ceremony was to take place in the hall, which was decorated with all the bright autumn flowers the old gardener had been able to collect in the garden. They had almost succeeded in concealing the shabbiness and gloom of the room. Laura was late. The clergyman had already had time to smell the dahlias three times before she appeared. Her expression had something of both defiance and anxiety, as if the guests had assembled there to amuse themselves at her expense. But Herman's looks apologised both for the delay and for his having to stand on the right of his lady.

Laura's voice sounded impatient when she answered her "Yes." It sounded as if she had been kept waiting at the booking-office window before a long journey.

During dinner she was also nervous. She was silent, and emptied her glass absent-mindedly, and drummed with her fingers on the table during the clergyman's speech. The speech was somewhat lugubrious. It seemed as if he had only two speeches to choose from, one for weddings and the other for funerals, and as if he had fallen on the wrong one.

Laura's brothers were sitting opposite, farther down the table. There was a challenging and hostile flash in her eyes as she looked at them. She suddenly raised her glass to Peter, who looked like a dressed-up farm hand.

"Your health, Mr. Bailiff!" she said. "It feels queer to be in evening-dress, doesn't it?"

Her voice sounded strained. She looked quickly and appealingly at Herman, who, however, did not seem to understand. Angry at not receiving any support, though it was for his sake she was taking her revenge, she now turned on Stellan. Stellan had placed himself beside Elvira Lähnfeldt, now a slim and distinguished-looking young lady, who chatted about horses and tennis. He seemed to enjoy paying her attention. He did it with the expression of a man who is already accustomed to succeed with the ladies. "Look at me!" he seemed to be saying. "I am privileged to wear a full-dress uniform. I belong to the few who look dressed-up when they wear civilian clothes. I am born for the good things in life, for pretty women and a fine setting." But Laura knew her elegant brother. She knew how to

penetrate his arrogant self-assurance. Her voice became suddenly tender and affecting.

"Stellan," she said, looking into his eyes over the sparkling champagne, "old Hermansson died so suddenly that neither you nor I had an opportunity of thanking him. Now as you are sitting here, with Herman in front of you, I think you ought to stand up and make a speech to his father's memory. For if he had not been so awfully decent and helped you, instead of being such a really smart officer and lady's man as you are now, you would have been quite an ordinary little bank-clerk or teacher of mathematics or something equally ridiculous and civilian!"

Miss Lälínfeldt looked as if she had heard something positively indecent. Stellan bit his lip and grew a trifle pale. He did not rise, and he made no speech, but he straightened himself as if to salute, and lifted his glass, without saying a word, to Herman, who looked very embarrassed and could not understand at all what had come over his dear Laura.

But Laura at once became wildly gay. She had had her revenge, and she could now say good-bye to stupid old Selambshof.

She looked smilingly over all the flowers and the heads in order to say a last contemptuous good-bye to the old dining-room where she had eaten so much porridge and where they had given each other so many kicks underneath the table. Then her glance fastened on the portrait of old Enoch over the green settee. It was more visible than usual because of two sconces which had been moved in from the blue room. The old man stood there, with his steel-capped stick in his thin, claw-like hand, and fixed his glance upon her. Laura had never observed before what scornful, sneering eyes he had. It was as if he looked straight through her love.

"You may wriggle about, my doll, but you can't get away from me, anyway."

She took Herman's hand. "Won't it soon be over?" she murmured.

At last they said good-bye. Laura was already standing in the porch dressed in her fur coat. Then she saw Herman walk up to Stellan and Peter and pat them on the shoulders. He looked very moved and solemn and magnanimous. She could understand that he asked them not to be annoyed with

her. Stellan shrugged his shoulders, and she could see by his lips what he answered.

"Stage-fright . . ."

Then the silence of the cold, star-lit autumn night was broken by a roar of deep bass voices, and then there was the partering of rice against the carriage windows and a forward jerk of the horses.

Laura flung herself into Herman's arms. She wanted to flee away from something at any cost—as if she did not want to see anything or know anything.

The following day Hedvig came in to Peter, who was lying on the sofa with a pipe that had gone out in the corner of his mouth, feeling a little stale after the wedding celebrations which he and his companions had continued noisily until the early morning. Hedvig came slipping in and looking paler and more severe than ever. Peter felt really frightened of her. He felt like a big, swollen gland which has secreted the worst excretions of sin.

"You will have to get somebody else to nurse father," said Hedvig; "I am not going to stay here any longer. There is nothing but dissipation and vileness. Nobody seems to think that we may be dead to-morrow. I am going to take a course in nursing, and then I shall join the Red Cross."

Peter began to fear new unforeseen expenses. He begged and prayed, he clumsily touched on all sorts of points. Finally he stretched out a finger and poked it into the region of her heart.

"Hedvig, dear, one fine day you will also get married."

Peter stopped dead. He felt as if he had sand-paper in his throat. Hedvig stood motionless and stared at him with loathing in her eyes.

"You are disgusting!" she said in a low voice. "I hate all men. I will never, never marry!"

And with that she left the room.

A fortnight later Hedvig had started as a probationer at a hospital. And she never put her foot inside Selambshof.

Peter did not know if he felt this as a loss or a relief. Sometimes he felt as if his bad conscience had left him. Sometimes he felt a little alarmed. With the departure of Hedvig he seemed to have lost his last connection with "The Powers."

But Mrs. Laura at Ekbacken was very annoyed when Peter stalked in one day and told her about Hedvig's new move.

"It really is a pity about Hedvig," the little wife exclaimed. "Just think how really beautiful she can be sometimes, Herman. It almost hurts one. Couldn't we find her a husband some way or other, Herman dear?"

Mrs. Laura still lived on in her honeymoon, and she thought that all people ought to marry.

Herman moved away the pink silk ribbon of her coquettish boudoir cap and kissed her hair.

"She is as pretty as any one can be who is not fair," he whispered.

By now Peter had gone again. This sort of thing was unbearable. They don't care a straw either for me or Hedvig, he thought sadly in his loneliness. But wait a little, Laura has still got claws in her silky hands. Herman will feel them soon enough.

This thought consoled him a little.

The honeymoon was scarcely over before Mrs. Laura realised that there would be no wedding trip that spring. No, she was definitely cheated of it, cheated of her grand wedding trip. She had not imagined things would turn out like that. This might possibly have been permitted to occur in the remote future, but just now she had desired nothing but happy surprises.

At first Laura told Herman nothing. She felt that it would be humiliating to admit her condition. But she observed him secretly. She watched for a searching or a triumphant expression in his face. Has he been expecting this? Was he only playing with me when he spoke about the wedding trip? she thought. And she felt something in her heart that almost resembled dislike. But then it struck her how sad and strange and really impossible it was that she was feeling dislike of her *own* Herman. And then she went down to the office and let him kiss her behind old Lundbom's back. But she was not yet able to speak about it. She felt a strange cold shame at her condition. In her there was nothing groping with tender hands towards the new life. It was as if this tender seed of life had been growing outside her and not beneath her heart.

After a few weeks Laura had no need to decide whether

to tell or not—she simply could not hide it. She felt sick, and she could not for ever run away and hide every morning. Laura had never been ill since she had the measles as a child. She felt a cold dread. It was as if her body were insulted every day. In her mirror she seemed to see how ugly and pale she was already growing. Still Herman said nothing. He was only doubly tender and attentive. But Laura saw all the same a flash of irritating pride and satisfaction in his eyes. And she turned away and set her teeth. What sort of a knight was this whose kisses at once produced sickness? She seemed to feel his pride like a pain within her. And then a torrent of complaints and accusations broke from her. Herman had cheated her out of her wedding trip! And she had not been allowed to live in town, as she wanted! And now she was ill, awfully ill! And she was getting ugly, old and ugly! And soon she would probably be dead. Yes, this would certainly mean her death!

Herman made no reply to all these accusations, which induced in him a solemn mood. He stroked her hair softly and calmly as one would in putting a crying child to sleep. And in the end Laura could find no other place than his arms in which she could cry out her heart.

After a time she grew calmer. The first crisis was over. It looked as if she would submit to her fate with a certain equanimity.

One dark and wet December day Laura was sitting in the bedroom window sewing some small garments. She always locked the door so as not to be taken by surprise. The sewing did not amuse her, but she did it in order to pass the time.

“Ugh!” she had pricked her finger. She stared at the red drop of blood, and with a long sigh let the sewing fall into her lap.

Out of doors it was drizzling from the grey winter sky. Through the bare lilac hedge Laura could see the yard. There lay the cutter, their cutter, drawn up forlorn under its ugly unpainted cover. Their beautiful summer cutter! It looked like a butterfly with the wings pulled off, and the crutches were its legs. It suddenly occurred to Laura that the boat had never won a prize. There had always been something to prevent it. Supposing it was not so finely designed and built after all!

Laura suddenly felt terribly depressed at this thought. She could not understand herself why she felt so sad. She rose up groaning and went to her chest of drawers. In the bottom drawer beneath her chemises and bits of ribbon there lay a small locked box. She found the key hidden amongst her jewellery. Then she took out her diary, the romantic diary from Neuchâtel, and sat down to read it from beginning to end. She hastened nervously through its pages, and it seemed as if she had jumped with great anxious strides back into the past. But there was no refuge there. She could not help sneering at all that sloppy, girlish nonsense. No, the past was past. As she was turning a page, a drop of blood fell on it. Laura threw away the book. Then she saw that there were many drops of blood on her light grey dressing-gown also. "Blood," she thought with a shiver. "I shall give my blood. I shall suffer and sacrifice myself for another. People say that it is a splendid and glorious sensation. But I am not made that way. Herman must teach me. He must treat me more severely—bend me to it——"

Laura dashed on her fur coat and galoshes and flew down to the office where Herman was talking to Lundbom about the lawsuit, which looked as if it would be prolonged.

But Herman did not handle her firmly. He was only kind and indulgent and gave her much well-meant advice: "You must not go about thinking of disagreeable things: you must just make yourself comfortable and let me look after you." And then he telephoned for theatre tickets for the evening.

Herman did not understand that he had a soul to fight for, a soul round which the magic circle was about to close again.

Laura could not help pondering over this lawsuit about the shore rights. If Herman had not allowed it to interfere she would now have been on her wedding trip. And then all this would not have happened. No! then this would not have happened. How Laura arrived at this conviction seems strange, but as we all know our most sensible thoughts are not the most persistent ones.

Laura began to hate that lawsuit. Sometimes it almost seemed as if she wanted Herman to lose it. What if she should go over to Peter and talk it over with him for a moment. For the first time Laura had a certain furtive feeling of attraction to Selambshof. She had not been

there since her wedding. But now the spirit of family called gently to its erring child.

Peter sat in his office writing in his books. The room was thick with tobacco smoke, and Peter the Boss looked so coarse and vulgar that Laura at once dismissed all the subterfuges she had thought out.

"Herman's lawsuit?" muttered Peter. "Well, between ourselves, I should have settled the matter while the door was still open. The Town Council offered forty thousand for the little strip of shore, and it was a fine offer. If Herman had accepted, they would never have found out that his title was doubtful. It all hangs on some old papers dating from the eighteenth century, and then justice is like a lottery. But Herman won't give up the least bit of Ekbacken of his own free will, and of course that's very fine of him—but, if one wants to strike fine attitudes . . ."

Peter leered with half-closed eyes through the smoke, with his dull peasant cunning. Compared with Herman, Peter looked a real monster. But all the same, Laura listened attentively to his words. She waited greedily for a shrug of the shoulders or a note of tolerant contempt, in order that she might, as she thought, become angry with him and say something really nasty. But in point of fact she was seeking with a strange sort of hunger to effect a secret reconciliation with something within herself, something that had been concealed by the rosy veil of her foolish sentimentality.

On her way home, Laura stopped in the course of the avenue by the big oak which she and Stellan had tricked Herman into climbing. "Were you hoarse yesterday, Herman?" Oh, how furious she was with her husband for having allowed himself to be tricked that day!

For several days she went about at Ekbacken looking at Herman from hiding-places and ambushes. She felt a stranger to him, as she beheld his open countenance. A certain expression of unperturbed self-confidence in him annoyed her in some way. What was he really so confident about? He does not listen or watch, nor does he fight to defend me and mine, she thought. Why is he not cleverer and quicker than Peter and Stellan? Why does he not look through them? Why does he not look through me? Laura had a strange feeling of the insecurity of Herman's position—that there was a conspiracy against him, against them.

And she had an irresistible desire to arouse him, to perturb him, and goad him on with insidious words. They were sitting planning summer yachting trips, when she suddenly exclaimed :

"Fancy, if you could explore a little ashore, too, Herman."

When that shaft missed its mark she began to prophesy losses and misfortunes.

"I am sure you will lose that stupid lawsuit, Herman."

Herman replied by placing a shawl over her shoulders. Then she seized the most dangerous weapon she could think of, and told him of the conversation she had overheard between Stellan and Peter on her wedding day.

"Just fancy! they said that you were not a business man at all, Herman. That you were a good-natured simpleton that any one could twist round his little finger. That's what they said, and I think they ought to pay for that. You ought somehow to put them down a peg."

However strange it may sound, Laura was nevertheless still fighting for her love when she spoke like this. It was the last spasm of her feeling for him. But Herman understood nothing. He only became serious and pulled a face for a moment. Then he dismissed the subject.

"Nonsense, child, you misunderstood them. How can you imagine such a thing! Near relations like that! Besides, I have stolen from them the best thing they had, their pretty sister."

He wanted to kiss her on the neck, but Laura pushed him violently away from her and ran into the bedroom, seized by an unreasoning frenzy.

The last months before the birth of the child were very difficult for Herman. He was exiled from the bedroom into the smoky atmosphere of the study, where he had to sleep on a sofa. He was a ridiculous, superfluous, and disagreeable person in his own home. Even the maids were rude to him. He went about in a constant state of nervousness in this house where he was the only man. The poor fellow did not revolt, but his face grew longer and longer. He busied himself with his beloved cutter, since he was not allowed to busy himself with Laura. Above all, he felt a compelling need to go and amuse himself with his summer things. It was as if he were still a child, longing for the promise of the summer holidays. He still cherished their

semblance of liberty without responsibility. But in the evening he took refuge in spirit and his father's game of Patience—hoping that his beloved and exquisite Laura would return to him after the birth of her child.

But Laura lay on her bed staring at the ceiling. She was full of bitterness and disappointment. Something within her that had been deliciously softened now hardened again and left a scar behind. She was full of anger against Herman, who was not man enough to break down her egoism ; who gave her a child, but was unable to make her feel a mother.

Laura was very ill towards the end. She felt her pains and her helplessness as direct insults by Herman. Sometimes she almost went mad with fear at her approaching delivery. For a woman whose being is cramped by egoism the agony of childbirth is doubly terrible. There is no joy in the suffering. It is martyrdom without faith. After a struggle of three days she gave birth to a boy. When they wanted to place the child beside her, she pushed it away with her last remaining strength.

"Take it away," she muttered. "I don't want to see it."

That was the first day. Afterwards she calmed down and showed a certain interest in her child. But she could not bear to hear it cry. Then it had to be taken away into another room at once. And she could not be persuaded to suckle the newborn child. Thus far Nature had forced her, but now at last she could say "No." Oh, what a joy to be able to say "No" at last !

When a mother is not delivered of her egoism it grows sevenfold worse.

There is something mysterious in the quick recovery of women after childbirth. In a week and a half Mrs. Laura was up again, well and flourishing, more beautiful than ever, without any trace of all the suffering that she had passed through—at least no outward traces. She made a very charming picture with her son, when she occasionally condescended to bend over his bed and pat his cheek. Herman, who had already forgiven her for not wanting to suckle their little Georg, was quite ready with his admiration and chivalrous attentions to the young mother.

And Laura accepted the homage calmly and unmoved.

Herman was still a very young man. He could not go about for ever satisfied with the sensation of being a happy

father. There came a moment when he wanted to receive some of the gracious caresses that were occasionally bestowed on little Georg. He found something especially bewitching in Laura's new fullness, in the milky whiteness of her skin, in her lazy, contented, cat-like purring after the storm she has passed through. But he was far too sensitive to behave roughly. And there was something in that purring that made him a little shy and timid. He went about with a new and hesitating love as if he were the fiancé of his own wife. He seized every opportunity to pay her little attentions and to make her little presents which she graciously deigned to accept. Soon, Herman thought, I shall be a happy man again. But Laura smiled and shrugged her shoulders. She was playing with her tall fiancé. She gave him her little finger. But when he suddenly wanted the whole hand she shook her head and said "No"—a pitiless, purring little "No."

Herman reproached himself. "I have not behaved properly," he thought. "I have been too rough and hasty." And then once more he played the chivalrous fiancé for a while, and tried to get her out in the yacht as he did last summer; but no! the lake amused her no longer. Then he heaped amusements, jewels, and pretty clothes upon her. She developed a studied coquetry and opened out boldly in the sunshine.

Now it was their wedding-day. Herman waited on her with an enormous bunch of red roses; he appeared at dinner in full dress and drank her health in champagne and appealed to their sweet memories. At last he thought she would be able to celebrate the anniversary of their wedding. For a moment Laura seemed touched. But it was only the champagne. At the last moment she turned away from him, froze up, and talked of her delicate health, of an uncontrollable anxiety, and held up the child as a shield between herself and her husband. And then the key grated in the bedroom door and Herman was shut out.

Laura sat down on the edge of her bed and slowly picked Herman's roses to pieces. She felt that she would never again belong to him. It was not only cowardly selfishness in face of the new demands of life. She was no longer afraid, because her body had already forgotten. No; she no longer wanted to belong to *him*. It was the air itself here at old Hermansson's Ekbacken that did not suit her.

Laura flicked away the last rose petal. He allowed me to lock the door, she thought, with a shrug of her shoulders. I am much stronger than he is.

It is dangerous for a woman of Laura's temperament to begin to think like that.

Herman's wounded pride did not rebel, he did not seek any revenge. He was miserable and in despair. He fell on his knees and begged and entreated her, humiliated himself before her. And then she despised him, grew tired of him, and became cruel, deliberately cruel, so that afterwards she was half surprised at herself.

Herman flew to drink and neglected his work. All ordinary business was, of course, still in Lundbom's hands, but Herman supervised the building on the slips. Now he roamed about, brooding and gloomy, gave orders and counter-orders, began to quarrel with his men, and then suddenly he threw it all up and went down to stare at the dump. Yes! that had been the result of his lawsuit. The ground over which the town had acquired the shore rights was his, but they had begun to fill in the lake in order to build a quay. Barge after barge came along with broken china and bricks, rubbish and sweepings. The evil-smelling dump already stretched far out into the lake. One could see it all from the windows of Ekbacken, and the comfort of the old place was gone. Herman would stand there for hours, with his hands in his pockets, and reflect with a certain melancholy pleasure how the town dumped its rubbish there under his very nose. Then he would go inside and sit down and drink.

Once, when he was half drunk, he struck Laura, when for the fiftieth time she cast the unsuccessful lawsuit in his face. It was a feeble, hesitating blow that only recoiled on his own suffering heart. But Laura accepted it with secret satisfaction. She had already begun to plan how she might escape with the greatest possible profit from this besieged fortress, whilst retaining all the honours of war.

An unhappy marriage is the finest arsenal of egoism. In the constant clash of two wills, selfishness sharpens its edge, and in the suffering of an opponent tempers its steel.

Laura developed surprisingly fast. It was not long before she understood with masterly cunning how to push

Herman to extremes and to make him compromise himself seriously whilst she herself wisely kept quiet. It was she who encouraged him to seek men's company and to amuse himself in town so that he should be spoken of as a reveller and a drunkard. Finally, it was she who, in devious ways, reminded him that the world was full of women and thus furtively placed in his hands an instrument of revenge for her coldness. Otherwise Herman would never have been able to make up his mind. He was, as it were, hypnotised by her. Certainly it seemed as if it was directly by her secret influence that he threw himself, with the courage of despair, and without a spark of desire, into the arms of a waitress at the nearest public-house. But all the same some childish hopes of making Laura jealous must have seized him, for a woman's voice began to ask for him on the telephone, and the poor boy tried to look provokingly cheerful when he answered. These conversations on the 'phone were followed by nights out which in their turn were followed by forced explanations which Laura had never asked for. Finally, in order to reveal the situation quite clearly to her, he began to forget and leave lying about short, incriminating notes where Laura must find them. She almost felt sorry for him. But, anyhow, she took great care of the letters.

With a selection of these documents in her little silk bag, Laura now paid a visit to Selambshof. She went off in a state of clear, cool exhilaration like a business man who is about to settle up a difficult piece of business. It seemed as if she wanted to gather strength amidst the old surroundings before the decisive battle. But all this did not prevent her from playing the martyr—a rôle that was really more pleasant than she had anticipated. Even when confronting Peter the Boss, it had its satisfaction, though she felt that he looked through her completely. Peter, of course, was disgusting. She was almost ashamed to meet him in the street in town. And all the same, here in his office, she felt a strange affinity to him. Yes, it was almost like quenching one's thirst to look at his coarse ugliness. And now she suddenly knew instinctively that their wishes concerning Herman coincided.

Laura presented her husband's compromising letters with a tragic mien, and she soon saw Peter's eyes looking at her with almost frightened admiration. "How the deuce have

you already brought him so far?" they seemed to ask. But meanwhile he poured forth expressions of good-natured and sentimental commiseration, in much the same way as a dog dribbles when it catches sight of a rich piece of food. But afterwards he showed his teeth.

"Valuable papers," he muttered.

It came out so suddenly that Laura had some difficulty in preserving her mien of martyrdom.

"Of course I can no longer live with Herman," she sighed.

"These letters are worth at least a hundred thousand," said Peter.

"I want to know how to set about getting a divorce. It's probably a dreadful business."

Peter thought for a moment and then he brightened up.

"I will speak to Lundbom. He knows everything."

"Lundbom?"

"Yes, Lundbom's the man. He won't suspect that it concerns you two. He is absolutely blind to everything personal."

In spite of her martyr's air Laura laughed low.

"Hum! That really would be rather funny."

Peter had a free consultation with Lundbom at their next card-party. Lundbom saw no escape for the faithless spouse—either hopeless and scandalous divorce proceedings or a friendly settlement with a promise to surrender the children and a handsome allowance.

Armed with this information, Laura made a great scene with Herman. Now all of a sudden she pretended to be insulted, in despair, and mortally wounded in her wifely dignity. She took the matter in such deadly earnest and was so absorbed in the dramatic situation that she almost began to believe in her feelings herself. Herman was aghast. His first feeling was one of wild joy that she had after all suffered, that she still loved him. This made him forget that it was she herself who had placed his revenge in his hands. But after her first outburst Laura continued more calmly, with profound reproach in her tone. Herman might have waited for her. A little patience only and everything would perhaps have been all right between them again. "You might have excused a poor woman who has had to pass through so much."

Laura was magnificent when she said all this. Her words fell like molten lead on Herman's heart. He con-

fessed his helplessness, his despair at his indulgence in spirits, and his disgust at his sorry folly with the other woman, who had never given him a moment's relief. He was filled with a deep despair and remorse, and begged her forgiveness with tears streaming from his eyes.

It was the old, banal, and horrible struggle, in which the result is a foregone conclusion, the struggle between the one who loves and the one who is loved.

Laura was merely irritated by Herman's tears. Did she suspect that they sprang from sources which in her had already dried up? Was that why her tone was so hard and dry? When one cannot be Love one wishes to be Fate. Oh, there was a secret luxury in standing there stiff and unyielding.

"You have killed my love," she said. "I want a divorce and I shall take Georg. You have no right to refuse."

Herman staggered as if he had been struck in the face. The violence of the blow prevented him from seeing how the whole thing had been prearranged.

He stood there gazing around him in front of an image of stone and muttered alternate prayers and curses till at last he ran out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

But Herman could not get away from the fact that Laura had everything beautifully arranged. She had public opinion on her side, she had witnesses and letters. If he wanted to escape the horrible divorce proceedings he must accept her conditions. So he had to take the familiar journey to Copenhagen and give up little Georg, and mortgage Ekbacken heavily in order to purchase a nice little annuity for his wife.

He stayed on in his lonely home with a bleeding hatred. Sometimes he did not know whether it was hatred or love. But Laura made a triumphant entry with baby and annuity into an elegant little flat in Karlavägen, in the same house as Stellan had his little two-roomed bachelor flat. She was determined to enter society in order to amuse herself, and for this purpose Stellan's brother-officers and his circle of fine friends might be invaluable for a divorced young wife.

The very evening that Laura moved in she went down to see Stellan.

"I did not stay at the old lake," she said, "and the little idyll did not materialise."

"No, no!" said Stellan. "Shall we play a game of écarté?" And they did.

X I

THE SPANISH SAINT

ONE fine day in September Stellan Selamb, lieutenant of the Göta Guards, was out at field manœuvres at Lidingön with his platoon. They had already during the clear and cool morning hours practised advancing in open formation through the broken brushwood to the right of the main road, when he gave over the command to the sergeant and, consulting his map, began to climb a steep hill path to make an attack on his own. After some searching he found another new cross road which brought him to a large, new, and somewhat strange-looking house, which lay alone in the midst of the dense pine wood.

Stellan did not associate with architects and did not usually pay much attention to houses. But he was accustomed to safe old manor-houses which seemed to have grown out of the ground where they stood. This house, on the contrary, looked as if it had fallen down from the sky with its dazzling white walls broken up in a fantastic way, and its bright green roof! It was positively difficult to tell whether it was meant for a temple, a sanatorium, a museum, or perhaps even an ordinary house. Anyhow, Stellan hammered the antique knocker against a huge black church door densely studded with coarse nails.

A groom opened the door.

"The master is in bed, but I am to announce visitors all the same."

He disappeared, but returned at once with the message that if the lieutenant would look at the pictures for a moment his master would receive him. Stellan walked through several large rooms full of pictures, like picture-galleries. Some of them he knew from Percy's old flat in town, but most of them had probably been bought during his last long journey abroad. There was both ancient and modern

art, Spanish and Dutch masters, and some of the most modern impressionists, but he could discover no trace of Percy's own canvases.

"Just like him," Stellan thought; "they are, of course, relegated to some old boxroom."

At last the door into the bedroom was opened. There lay "The China Doll." It was the same thin, refined face as before. And the same little smile—amiable, gentle, and slightly reserved. Only the blue of the eyes was not as cool as before.

"Good morning, Percy, old man! I happened to have field exercises in the neighbourhood and thought I would have a peep at your new Tusculum."

"Oh, I am so pleased when somebody is kind enough to look in."

Percy's voice sounded strangely fragile. But Stellan did not notice it. He was so accustomed to see Percy ill. Having looked closely at the bedroom he suddenly burst out laughing. It was black and white, with a vaulted ceiling and heavy, carved oak furniture. The chairs seemed completely taken up with their own ornament, and would, no doubt, have looked upon the back of any one sitting down on them as a desecration. Percy's bed resembled most nearly a catafalque, and it was standing in an alcove which looked like a chapel in the church of "The Third Kingdom."

"I say, this looks rather as if it was prepared for the eternal sleep," Stellan exclaimed, "for a marble statue."

Percy's smile was a shade more wan.

"Yes, perhaps you are right. . . ."

Stellan opened the door of a W.C. which the uninitiated would have taken for some kind of confession box. He suddenly grew furious, and felt a desire to say something indecent; he wisely kept it back, however.

"Excuse me, Percy, old chap, but do you really feel at home here?"

"No, I can't say I do."

"Well, why the devil do you have it in this style, then?"

Percy looked at the ceiling of the alcove, which was painted all over with pentagrams and spirals.

"Well, my architect did it," he muttered resignedly. "He wanted it like this. And I dared not oppose him. It

is so difficult when you are not able to say that you cannot afford it. It brings so many responsibilities. Do you know, Stellan, I don't think it is possible really to will something, really to be something for your own sake, if you have lots of money."

Stellan thought that if that was the difficulty he was ready to ease him of his burden.

"Poor Percy!" he laughed sarcastically. "The prisoner of wealth, for life."

But then he remembered the refined little boy dressed in white behind the gates at Stonehill. And it struck him that there might perhaps be a bitter, blighting truth in his exclamation, and that Percy perhaps was a shade more serious this time than usual. Stellan drummed, a little embarrassed, on the rough, carved block of black oak that constituted the foot of the bed.

"I say, Percy, how are you, really?"

Percy smiled an apologetic smile.

"Well, to be frank, I had a rather serious hæmorrhage of the lungs a week and a half ago . . . my chest has always been weak, you know."

For various reasons Stellan was horrified.

"But your footman did not tell me so. I had not the slightest idea that . . ."

"Well, I don't want to advertise my illness."

"What does the medicine man say?"

"He shakes his head and says that I must lie quiet in bed for the present, only lie quiet. . . . But, dash it all, Stellan, don't take it so seriously. I myself am rather pleased. I have never been anything but a dilettante. But this will perhaps be my opportunity. A real danger! An honest compulsion! Sometimes I feel as if I would really be able to do something after all. Oh, there is a curious excitement in the fever and the imminence of death!"

Stellan was just pondering how best in these circumstances he might decorously prepare Percy for the comparative relief to be derived from backing a bill for five thousand. Then a head with fair, straggling hair and broad, good-natured features peeped in through the door and disappeared again, with a smile of apology, at the sight of Stellan. It was the nurse. There were red spots in Percy's cheeks, and his voice sounded worried and nervous.

"If you knew how I suffer from that woman," he whispered. "She is not at all unkind to me. On the contrary. But I can't stand people with that sort of stolid face. I shiver when she touches me."

"Why don't you send her away?"

"No; it is so difficult. I can't bring myself to do it. Once she is here she has certain claims on me."

Percy was silent for a moment, then he stretched out his hand entreatingly.

"Perhaps you could help me, Stellan? Hasn't the Army some connection with the Red Cross? Oh, if you could find me in some way a more bearable face!"

Stellan suddenly had an idea, a strange, half-impossible idea which, however, at bottom, seemed to him to be curiously charged with infinite possibilities. "Hedvig!" he thought. "Hedvig!" He had to make an effort to recover his normal, smooth, and kindly tone.

"I could speak to my sister Hedvig," he said. "She is a nurse. But I tell you beforehand that she has a sombre and strange temper. But her face is really something for an artist to look upon."

Percy became quite excited, and was filled with touching gratitude.

"A face, a temperament, a human being! Oh, how grateful I should be to you!"

"Good! I'll speak to her if she can get free. Anyhow, this grinning monster must be got rid of!"

With this Stellan took a warm good-bye. But at the door he turned round with his most charming and unconcerned expression.

"By the way, Percy, I am going about with a damned little bill in my hip pocket. You would not like, by any chance, to put your scrawl across it?"

"With pleasure, old boy, with pleasure."

Stellan stepped whistling out of Hill's villa, and, in excellent temper, resumed his command over his dusty and perspiring platoon.

The same evening Stellan went to see Laura. He had got into the habit of running up to her to talk things over before he settled anything important.

Laura was dressing to go to the theatre. He helped her to fasten her frock behind.

"Percy has had a hæmorrhage of the lungs and is dissatisfied with his nurse. I offered to get Hedvig for him. What do you think about it?"

"Poor Percy!"

"But how shall I persuade Hedvig?"

"You must talk about sacrifice, and give her an opportunity to look long-suffering."

Stellan rang up the Red Cross at once. There he was given another telephone number and rang again. A weak, tremulous voice replied:

"Sister Hedvig? Yes, I'll tell her."

Hedvig came to the telephone. Stellan presented his case. He made Percy as ill as possible and begged her to sacrifice herself for their old friend. Hedvig's distant voice assumed a peculiarly hard, resigned note.

"I don't think I can."

"But why?"

"Well, at least not at once."

"Why?"

She lowered her voice.

"No. It won't be . . . all over here for another few days. . . ."

"All over!" Then a human being lay dying at the other end of the wire! Stellan felt a cold shiver. He looked at Laura, who sat there in low-cut evening-frock polishing her nails. He looked around him in the coquettish little room. All over in a few days. All over! How curiously Hedvig had said that. It was as if she had wanted to force the thought of death on him like a tablespoonful of medicine.

"Well . . . I may tell poor Percy that you will come when you . . . you are free?"

"Yes; I suppose I must give up my idea of resting a little."

Then she rang off.

Stellan hung up the receiver.

"Yes, she will go to Percy as soon as her present patient has had time to die. And it is Hedvig who is leading such a life! Really, I can't understand it. . . ."

Laura pursed up her lips whilst she pulled on her glove. She looked unusually free from any sentimentality at that moment.

"Hedvig is frightened," she said.

Stellan felt nervous.

"Frightened? Damned funny way of being frightened. What do you really mean?"

Laura's answer came short, sharp, and pleased. One could see how she had worried about this matter and at last found a satisfactory explanation.

"Who is it that runs about in the cemeteries at midnight?" she said. "Precisely those who are afraid of ghosts. Others have no business there."

And then Mrs. Laura went to the theatre.

It was a fact that for a year and a half past Hedvig had been a trained Red Cross nurse, and that she was already one of those who was sent to the more difficult cases, and that she herself desired it so.

To her fellow-nurses she was an enigma. They felt at once that she was not one of those simple, good women whose hearts call them to serve, care for, and struggle against suffering and death. As they knew that she had gone straight from her sister's wedding to the hospital the younger nurses at once concluded that Hedvig's secret was unrequited love, but the older and more experienced nurses shook their heads.

The doctors also discussed Sister Hedvig. Men will always discuss women such as Sister Hedvig. After long discussions, which were not free from criticism, though they were supposed to be scientific, they too turned to love as explanation. And they, of course, protested against such childish nonsense as women's talk of an unhappy love. A young psychiatrist had the last word. He said nothing cynical. He would perhaps have done so ten years earlier. But now cynicism was no longer the fashion—at least among the psychiatrists—that was left to the surgeons and other humbler craftsmen.

"Sister Hedvig," the young doctor said, "is a very interesting case. As a matter of fact, she cannot look a healthy man full in the eyes. But all the same she at once chose the male division in the hospital. She simply had to go there; she was really incapable of doing her duty to the women patients. What else is that but a case of timid, wounded, sickly eroticism slinking away to sick people? She feels a secret relief in seeing men suffer and die. She sacrifices them to Eros—probably by a religious perversion of her feelings."

Thus spoke the young doctor, and did not observe his own involuntary confession of having looked very deep into Sister Hedvig's eyes.

Perhaps there was something in what he said after all. Though Laura had probably said the truest word. The fundamental fact in Sister Hedvig's nature was still fear. And this fear had not, as in Peter's case, spread over the surface in the shape of pretended good-nature and a magnificent tissue of lies. No, in Hedvig it grew inwards in the dark. And this growth she felt as an ever-present gnawing ache in her inmost being. In the end this dark, groping fear had become so much a part of her that every glimpse of happiness, liberty, spaciousness, only seemed to her a mockery. But her suffering was terrible just because of its indefiniteness, its formlessness, and its teeming darkness. Under these circumstances she must have felt every really definite cause for fear as a sort of relief, a release. He who sees need not brood. That was why the sick-bed and the death-bed held such a strange attraction for her. That was why her expression would sometimes reveal such curious relief in the presence of the most awful struggles. That was why she closed the eyes of the dead with such pale and still solemnity. She herself interpreted it as the brief precious peace of heart before God after service and sacrifice. During her training as a nurse, Sister Hedvig had turned more and more away from the world and relapsed into religious gloom. She walked about like a living protest against every form of levity and vanity.

And now she stood on a cold and clear September day by Percy's bed at Hill Villa.

Percy stared at her dark eyes and pale cheeks. It was really an unusual pallor. One did not know whether she burned or froze.

"And so you are Stellan's sister," he muttered. "We must have met, as children at least, when I was still living at Stonehill. Strange that I did not notice your looks then."

"I have always kept apart," she answered coldly.

Percy smiled a little apologetic smile.

"But now . . . now Sister Hedvig comes here and wants to help me, poor wretch. . . ."

"I will try to do my duty," answered Sister Hedvig.

Percy sank back with half-closed eyes on his pillow.

It suddenly seemed to him inconceivable that a woman with such a face should witness his frailty, help him to change his shirt, and reach him the basin. "I shall have a high temperature this evening," he thought. "But that doesn't matter. I shan't be bored anyhow."

Hedvig left the sick-room on some errand. When she came back Percy had already managed to allot a place to the newcomer in his world.

"Now I have got it," he said contentedly. "Sister Hedvig is a Spanish saint. Yes, I have seen Sister Hedvig hanging on a church wall in Toledo. . . . Or perhaps it is something Byzantine," he added thoughtfully. "Yes, you would look well in a mosaic . . . on a ground of gold . . . or perhaps a cold greenish-blue. . . ."

Sister Hedvig received this speech, which was to her partly incomprehensible, partly offensive, in silence. She had never before met a dilettante patron of art of Percy's type. She was highly distressed and confused by the whole atmosphere of Hill's villa. She walked with lowered eyes and frightened steps through these rooms in which the walls were covered with impudently brilliant coloured pictures. I will not even mention all the nudes that met her gaze everywhere without trace of shame, in strange and challenging forms. To her the nude was now exclusively associated with sickness and death. She could not and would not think of it except under fever-cooling bandages or under the surgeon's knife. And here it insolently glowed with health or made a pretence of harmony and peace which could be nothing but a delusion and abomination. It was incredible. But that was not all. Even from the landscapes it seemed to her that there emanated something of sin and danger. The mixture of French impressionism and national lyricism of that time, which nowadays appears to us so harmless and innocent, still seemed then alarmingly modern, and Hedvig also found in these pictures a defiant worldliness quite different from that of the old brown-gravy landscapes which hung on the walls at Selambshof. Art, with its flavour of sin and damnation, pursued her even into the sick-room. Opposite the bed there hung a picture of a handsome, naked youth who smiled an ecstatic smile though his breast was pierced with cruel arrows.

"Isn't he beautiful—Saint Sebastian?" said Percy

proudly. "I discovered him in Naples in an old Jew's shop. The painter is unknown, but you can see at once that he must have been a contemporary of Bernini. The typical mixture of sensualism and ecstasy of the baroque style cannot be mistaken. My Sebastian is a male cousin of Saint Teresa of the Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. His breast is full of the arrows with which the beautiful angel threatens her. One does not quite know if it is the arrows of love or of martyrdom."

Sister Hedvig looked at the floor and shook her head.

"I don't understand anything of all this. And I don't want to understand it either. I am not here to look at pictures."

In this strange world she had come into, Percy Hill's illness was somehow the only thing she had to hold on to, and she felt hurt that he did not take it seriously enough.

Percy looked quite frightened.

"Dear, dear! Surely I have not hurt you, Sister, in any way? I didn't mean to at all." Then he added, with a pale little smile, "I must talk about art, you see, otherwise my temperature will rise. . . ."

She did not give an answering smile.

She continued all along to be stiff, silent, and suspicious. In his weakness and helplessness he suffered at first from this lack of sympathy. If he had been an artist he would perhaps have felt a genuine hatred for her. But he was only a dilettante and an amateur, so he not only suffered it, but even began to be attracted by the gloomy and rigid creature as he might have been by some old, sombre, family treasure which had been hidden from the world in some dusty and sunless corner. Yes, exactly like some gloomy treasure which dumbly reminds us of the dreams and passions of a bygone age, and which is not for sale amongst the rubbish of to-day.

Thus far had Percy come after a week's dilettante analysis of Hedvig's personality. By this time he had entirely ceased to speak about art. But one evening, when she stood by the window staring out on the hard and windswept autumn sky, the expression on her face suddenly brought an idea into his head.

"Sister Hedvig," he exclaimed, "won't you read to me a little out of the Old Testament?"

And he rang for a footman and sent him for a new illustrated *édition de luxe* Bible from the library.

But Hedvig refused at first. She was afraid of the echo from the luxurious rooms with their works of art just outside. She was afraid of his vain and scoffing secret thoughts. But Percy was persistent. He told her about his childhood, when his mother would sometimes read aloud to him out of the school Bible in the evenings. It sounded almost as if in his strange way he took the Scriptures seriously. And at last, to her own surprise, Hedvig gave in. His face lit up.

"Take Deborah's song," he begged, as keen as any child to hear its favourite story.

And Hedvig read in a low voice of Deborah, who led the chiefs of Israel, whose soul went forth in strength. But there was something too mournful and cold in her voice. Percy's sensitive ear suspected old Kristin's influence, the deep-rooted fatalism of the people. He was, however, afraid of hurting her, and let her finish the chapter.

"That is too hard and bright," he muttered. "There is too much victory for us two, Sister Hedvig. Take something more difficult and more gloomy."

And Hedvig read on. She did not know why herself. Perhaps she had a feeling in her inmost heart that he in some way seemed to understand her. But this no longer alarmed her shyness. He was so weak and helpless. He lay there in the shadow of death. He would never rise up and boldly cast her secrets in her face. So she read on. She read of how Jehu annihilated the whole house of Ahab, and of how the dogs ate Jezebel on the fields of Jezreel. And she read in the Book of Job how man, born of woman, lives a short time full of care, how his illness rises up and bears witness against him, and over his eyes rests the shadow of death. To the grave he must say, "Thou art my father," and to the worms of putrefaction, "My mother, my sister." And she read in Isaiah about the earth, which was consumed by the curse, how the sap of the vine sorrowed and the vine languished. Plaintive cries are heard over the wine, and all joy is like a sun that has set—all joy of the earth has disappeared. Dangers and pitfalls and snares lie in wait for you, inhabitants of earth! Earth is utterly broken down, and shall reel like a drunkard; it shall be clean dissolved.

Percy lay quite silent and looked at Hedvig. He followed unconsciously the movements of her lips. This is absolutely sincere, he thought. She is a being from the past. She belongs to an age when fear formed a great part of human life. It is strange to hear the Jewish cast of thought from her lips, persistent as the groans of a sufferer, bitter as the knowledge which is hammered into you by blow upon blow. Only the pressure of the world and sad experience . . .

And he felt a great joy as if he had succeeded at last in finding a really precious antique for his collection.

It was getting dusk, and Hedvig did not see the print any longer. She put down the heavy book. She had a sudden feeling of relief as after confession. Though faint and transient, it was nevertheless something unique in her life.

But already the next morning Hedvig felt a dull anxiety at having given herself up. And she was more curt and silent and reserved than usual.

In November, Percy grew somewhat worse. He was often troubled by coughs, and his temperature curve showed a tendency to rise. The doctor shook his head when his patient spoke of going to Switzerland.

"Not before the spring," he said. "Now we must be good and keep quiet and drink milk."

Percy did not like the doctor very much. He represented the prose side of his illness. But Hedvig looked meaningfully at her patient when the doctor had gone. She looked at him as if he had been a child who had wanted to run away from school but who had been brought to reason. She had grown with his weakness. She nursed him diligently and carefully, but with an expression of solemn superiority. "There, you see," she seemed to say, "after all, your vanity won't help you. Of what use now is your art and your worldly pride?"

Percy noticed it, but he did not grow angry. He was not of that kind. He also derived a sort of pleasure from this new development. Hedvig no longer seemed to him a dark and rare treasure that he had added to his collections. And he loved to droop away in sight of that sombre and stern virgin face. Even pain could give him a secret pleasure.

"This is an *auto-da-fé*," he muttered once in delirium. "I can see the sparks in the pupils of Sister Hedvig's eyes."

They are roasting me with slow fire because I have doubted the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception."

And then he smiled his mysterious, derisive little smile, which was so full of weakness and courage. But in the midst of the smile there came a sudden fit of coughing, accompanied by blood and froth between his pale lips, blood on the lace of sheets and pillows. His wound had broken out again. He had another attack of hæmorrhage of the lungs.

Percy's face grew still paler and thinner. It was as if he had shrunk before the cold breath of Death's wings. But he was never a coward in his suffering. There was never a trace of panic.

But his weakness was such that Sister Hedvig found no occasion for any anxious, defensive suspicion. She was afraid of life, but he no longer belonged to life, she thought. A dying man she dared to approach. Confronted by death she dared to be woman. Yes, now the shy, severe Sister Hedvig could be quite tender and open. Turning away a little, she could softly stroke his hand as it lay there so white on the eiderdown. Yes, sometimes she gave him little stealthy caresses that had no to-morrow. It was her woman's soul that lay half suffocated beneath her fear, which now ventured to make little hesitating excursions in the twilight of death.

Thus had Sister Hedvig by the force of circumstances come quite near to one who was the complete opposite of herself. We witness here the strange meeting of two persons, one of whom is sterile from fear and the other from lack of fear. Percy Hill's life showed a strange blunting of the faculty of fear. He had always lacked the spur to action and to life that fear provides. Hence his diletantism. He lived on his money without knowing anything about the hard struggle which had brought it together. He loved art without being capable of diving beneath the work itself to the deep disquietude which had created it. He never went beyond the enjoyment of it. His own creative work had only been a form of enjoyment. That is why he had never created anything new. He knew it himself, but he had not the strength to feel any real anguish over it, that anguish which might perhaps in the end have opened the gates to the mysterious creative world.

But now in the face of death this deficiency seemed like

a splendid liberation. It is a fact that death does not come to us as a stranger. It grows coarser or more delicate and refined according to our natures. Percy's death must, of course, be frail and subtle and with an element of incurable dilettantism.

"You must not think, Sister Hedvig," he whispered, with a little smile of ineradicable irony vanquishing his weakness, "that this is anything very extraordinary to me. There is really not very much that will be lost with me. I have always stood rather well with death. I cannot remember that I have ever fought against it even in the thoughts of my boyhood. My mother was so unnaturally afraid for me that I, by mere reaction, grew more and more indifferent. At first I hoped perhaps a little to get something from my illness. I hoped that the fever and the fine restlessness would yield me something. So much beauty has been born of consumption. Perhaps I still hope. But not so feverishly that it consumes me."

In vain Hedvig told herself that this was false blasphemy. In vain she entrenched herself behind her religious feelings. She felt that he did not lie. To her it seemed monstrous that a person could speak so without lying. An exquisite coolness descended upon her soul. Her own dark fear of life shrank in this unusual light. There were moments of a glorious release of the usual tension within her. She felt something almost resembling gratitude and tenderness. She need not hide anything, nor pretend, nor creep away. All this had no to-morrow. He could not betray her, nor trample upon her. He would soon die.

Thus Hedvig went about prepared to close his eyes, to mourn for him, and keep him as a beautiful memory which nobody in the world would know of, or could deprive her of.

Already she was depositing him, the secret treasure of the poor, with Death.

But now the unexpected happened—Percy Hill did not die. On the contrary, he began to pick up a little in the spring. In the beginning it almost looked as if he himself had been a little embarrassed and ashamed at this turn of events.

"I have never done what was expected of me," he said. "I never finished my pictures. And, of course, I did not see this thing through either. . . ."

But there was, all the same, something new in his tone. These phrases no longer rang as true as formerly.

You may have been nearly run over by a tram and it is only afterwards when you are safe on the pavement that you begin to be frightened and feel the threat of death within you. As his temperature fell there rose a new restlessness in Percy Hill. He began anxiously to avoid talking of death. It seemed as if he had been ashamed of his weakness. He did all he could to appear as well as possible. It was only with difficulty that he was kept in bed. He grew impatient at the constant relapses of the early spring into cold and miserable weather. He insisted on going somewhere where there was plenty of sunshine. He had suddenly been seized by a violent zest for life.

Yes, and now Percy Hill felt for the first time a certain fear of death. A mysterious change had taken place in him. He had been inoculated with some of Sister Hedvig's poisons in the same way as she had been with his.

How did she behave for her part now when he slowly began to slip out of the shadow of death under which they had come so near to each other? Did she draw back into her shell? Did she become the closed garden or the sealed spring once again? It might seem so. She had an expression which seemed to command him to forget what had passed between them. That furtive tenderness, whose shoots seemed only to thrive in darkness, ceased. But the seal was all the same broken. Her reserve and shyness could never be exactly the same again; they had no longer the true depth. There rather arose moments of a certain banal and everyday embarrassment between them. Percy clearly suffered in accepting her assistance. He shaved himself every day and became particular about his appearance. Certain situations galled him as being lowering to his masculine pride. It seemed as if he had to overcome a certain reluctance each time he had to call her "Sister Hedvig." Without saying anything, Hedvig acquired the habit of knocking at his door before she entered the room. She did this with a strange feeling half of bitterness and half of satisfaction. Her suspiciousness found the change in Percy's manners wounding. But in her inmost heart she proudly understood what it really meant. Officially she was as much a stranger in his world as ever before. But

it was a fact that she no longer walked through the picture galleries with lowered eyes. Though she did not admit it to herself, certain echoes of what he had said concerning pleasure and beauty being something self-evident would crop up in her thoughts. After a youth which had been hunted by the ghost of poverty, she sometimes felt a shiver run through her in the presence of this magnificent house and of all she had heard about his wealth. It was really something hitherto hidden and downtrodden in her Selamb soul that very cautiously raised its head.

From this moment Sister Hedvig began to develop a certain coquetry. If she read a silent question in Percy Hill's eyes she purposely appeared dull and impenetrable. Her instinct told her that a man like him was attracted by the unknown, by what was unlike himself. Consequently she carefully avoided betraying anything of the change that had taken place in herself. She well remembered what he had said about the image of the saint in Toledo and about the sparks from the stake in her eyes. So she now appeared really pale and dark and Spanish. And with secret joy she saw that the Spanish effect did its work. The cool and mocking light had disappeared from Percy's eyes. Instead, there sometimes came a shy and nervous look of supplication. He was clearly in love with her.

Then Stellan called, just at the right moment. He came from what seemed to have been a family council of the Selambs. Curiosity had been stimulated enormously of late. Percy was so rich that you could not help reflecting. Nothing was impossible. It might mean marriage; it might mean a bequest in his will. One did not know if he was going to live or die. Neither Peter nor Laura knew Percy Hill enough to call on him. Hedvig herself was impossible to approach. Laura had tried over the telephone but had, of course, got nothing out of her.

Then at last Stellan came home from a command in Norrland, and was sent out to Hill's villa at once to reconnoitre.

It was a clear, warm, sunny day after a long spell of cruelly disagreeable spring weather. Stellan had a strange gift of always bringing fine weather. Percy was sitting up in an easy-chair in front of an open window facing south. Sister Hedvig had slipped away into the darkest corner

with some kind of Christian needlework. Such April sunshine was still too much for her. Stellan had ridden out. He was walking up and down the room lightly striking his riding-boots with his whip. At first he had been shocked for a moment by Percy's wasted look, but now he was already praising his rapid recovery. He always talked a lot, Stellan. He had a peculiar tendency to dwell with a mixture of envy and admiration on Percy's precious art treasures, on his admirable patronage of art, and his subtle intelligence. He also returned several times by sly, roundabout ways to the subject of wealth and money.

"Yes, because Percy is the sort of man who must be reminded that he can get whatever he wants," he said. "He will forget to keep alive if you don't remind him."

Stellan was insistent as if at one and the same time he had wished to free Percy from his lack of self-confidence and rouse him from the lassitude of his illness. Percy listened with his eyes half closed. Of course he did not take all this seriously. But in his present frame of mind he enjoyed Stellan's talk all the same. It blended with the clear, strong sunshine and seemed to hold out something like a promise of life.

Hedvig in her corner also listened to this glorification of Percy. She suspected that Stellan was also addressing himself to her. When he returned to the subject of money and to the wonderful opportunities of becoming rich she looked down at her work and continued her sewing with feverish haste. She detested him, and yet she wanted to hear more. She grew hot and cold by turns. To save her life she could not have looked up.

But Stellan walked up and down between the two and observed them with cool and cheerful curiosity. He felt strangely elated. And then his black horse neighed outside by the gate-post, and a loud and festive flourish of trumpets like a call to battle was sounded in the clear, radiant spring air. Stellan took a hasty farewell. Hedvig accompanied him to the front door. She was astonished at herself for doing so. But there was a certain pleasure in walking through these magnificent rooms by the side of Stellan with his jingling spurs. Out on the stairs she looked into his eyes for a moment. There was a bitter and savage triumph in her glance. Stellan pointed to his horse.

" Winnings at cards," he said. " I have christened him the ' Ace of Spades.' Fine, isn't he ? "

And then he jumped into the saddle and trotted away down the hill.

Hedvig slowly returned to Percy, who was still sitting among his cushions in the sunshine.

Stellan's visit had, as it were, aired out the place after the long confined winter. Yes, they had lived as in a monastery cell. And now the horseman on his black steed had come like a messenger from the great, cold, exciting world beyond. And there was relief in that.

" As soon as I can I am going away," said Percy, " first to Meran and then to Mentone."

He looked at Sister Hedvig, who had resumed her sewing. She was sewing very fast and did not answer. Percy spoke again with forced ease :

" Are you coming with me, Sister Hedvig ? "

She shrugged her shoulders without looking up.

" There are other sick people who need me. . . ."

" I mean, will Sister . . . will Hedvig come with me as my wife ? "

Hedvig shrank farther into her corner. Her wretched fear once again took possession of her and thrust her into the deepest shadows.

" No . . . I can't . . . I will never be anybody's wife. . . ."

For a moment Percy looked at her with anxious amazement. He had lately done his utmost to appear as well and as manly as possible, and then the poor fellow all of a sudden completely changed his pose.

" But I . . . I am not a real man, Hedvig. Not now, at least. I am only a convalescent. And I don't know if I can live without your presence."

She was white and her hands trembled.

" If we can go on living as we have done before, then . . ."

" Yes, till I am well . . . and you yourself want it otherwise. . . ."

His voice sounded both sad and happy. He beckoned Hedvig towards him.

" Oh, we both need a lot of sunshine, you and I, Hedvig," he muttered.

And he took her head in his uplifted hands with an expression of reverence. It was as if he also wished to touch

her beautiful oval face with his fingers. Then he sank back against his cushions and breathed heavily, oppressed by his emotions. Hedvig had to lead him back to bed.

"Our Eros," whispered Percy, pointing at Saint Sebastian, "who smiles though his breast is full of arrows."

Such was Hedvig Selamb's engagement. She would have shrunk back frightened from complete matrimony. She dared to go half-way. It really was a typical Selamb insurance against the risks both of loneliness and poverty and the demands of life. But before the dawn of the next day she had already convinced herself that she was making a great sacrifice.

The banns had been read for the second time and Percy was expected on a visit to Selambshof, in which he had not set his foot since he was a child. Hedvig had gone there at the last moment. She could not, of course, stay on alone in the house of her fiancé.

The Selambs were sitting in front of a fire in the hall. The main building had stood empty the whole of the winter, since Peter nowadays lived in the bailiff's wing. The hall was like a cave. The winter cold still clung to the walls, though it was May. But that did not seem to disturb the Selambs. They whispered in eager tones, and were agreeably excited as if by an interesting game of cards. Now and then they threw pitying, envious, and secretly admiring side-glances at Hedvig, who was standing by one of the windows. Hedvig was dressed in a plain black frock. She was standing there alone, silent, cold, with a severe and haughty expression on her face. She looked down the avenue by which Percy would arrive. Yes, here her fiancé was about to drive up in a great fine carriage, round the very same bend as did Brundin once upon a time in his little green dogcart. And during dinner she would sit silent and erect by his side and scarcely taste her food. The silence would spread round her so that not even Laura would dare to begin her empty, worldly chatter. There would be a real contrast to all the shouts and hurrahs of her own unfortunate wedding. And it would be the last time Percy would appear at Selambshof. Yes, Hedvig had decided to have a quiet wedding ceremony without her relations. That would be the most dignified way. She had no further use for all these people out here. She would go abroad and leave it all behind.

Hedvig thought of all this as she stood at the window. The shadow of a smile passed now and again over her severe red lips. Wonderfully sweet contentment suffused her whole being. She trampled on her old fear, loneliness, and humiliation, and felt as if she had truly her old fears under her foot. But she could not trample them to death. One does not trample a shadow to death. It can only be killed by light. . . .

Then Percy Hill came driving up to the steps. He remained for a moment sitting in the open carriage looking up at the high, gloomy walls of Selambshof. It was impossible for him to escape a feeling of discomfort in the presence of this sham feudal architecture, this suburban Gothic which did not even take itself seriously. "Well," he thought, "we are going away from all this."

He entered. He moved slowly and looked very pale and thin in his black morning-coat. Nobody could help seeing that he had been in the shadow of death. For a moment he seemed to shrink from the wintry air inside. But his glance brightened when he caught sight of Hedvig's frock. He had been afraid to see her without her nurse's uniform. Her simple black frock seemed to him an expression of tactfulness. He kissed Hedvig's hand and greeted Laura and Stellan. Then it was Peter's turn. Percy had had no communication with him for many years. Peter's gross figure startled him somewhat. He offered his transparent fingers with half-closed eyes, and withdrew them again quickly with a little embarrassed smile.

Nobody said much. Laura pulled her shawl more closely over her shoulders, and even Stellan seemed somewhat ill at ease.

Then Hedvig led Percy, with an absent-minded expression, to the wedding presents which were laid out on a table by the window. There were crystal vases and bowls in the taste of the day—all eloquent of decent, commonplace, domestic life. Hedvig walked away. Percy looked at the floor.

"They are all overtaxing my nerves," he thought. "Such meaningless ugliness!" He had to make a real effort to realise that this was not a deliberate mockery of their marriage, but merely a sacrifice to the conventionalities. At last he began to thank everybody very eagerly and politely to right and left on behalf of himself and Hedvig.

It was Stellan who saved the situation. He took Percy's arm.

"Now I must show you round a little in this owls' nest," he said in a tone of command that had something engagingly impersonal in it. "Selambshof was not conjured up in a day like your palace. It is as old as sin, though it was unfortunately rebuilt, and spoilt in the process, some time in the 'fifties."

Percy stopped in the dining-room in front of old Enoch's portrait. Suddenly he looked quite relieved and was delighted.

"This is very interesting!" he exclaimed.

"Do you think so? It's our grandfather. An old devil, between ourselves."

Percy climbed up and examined the signature in the corner.

"Just fancy, a Tervillius! But yet not quite like him. He never achieved such rapid execution elsewhere. What swift, cruel characterisation! And he is otherwise so extremely conscientious."

"Well, he is said to have had his reasons for not loving old Enoch. It cannot have been very pleasant to owe him money."

"So it is the inspiration of hatred! Well, there are worse inspirations."

"Our dear grandfather was apparently not at all displeased with the caricature, though for certain reasons it cannot have been very agreeable to him. I suppose you know that Tervillius committed suicide . . . just a few days after he had finished out here?"

"Oh, so this is his last word . . . an anathema. . . ."

Hedvig had silently stolen up to them and stood there staring Old Hök in the eyes whilst she listened greedily to each word that was uttered. Percy pushed his arm smilingly under Hedvig's and eagerly solicited the condescension of his Spanish saint.

"Fancy, the last masterpiece of a distinguished artist! And quite unknown to the critics. That is really most remarkable."

Peter had also come up to the picture. "Is the old fellow really worth something?" he wondered.

"Thirty thousand, at least. It's a pity it is a family portrait, as one does not dare to make an offer for it."

The eyes of the Selambs lit up. They evidently regarded, their grandfather with a new interest.

"Thirty thousand for the curse," mumbled Hedvig, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"The old man gave five hundred," said Peter. "I have seen an old receipt. He was always a good business man."

"Aren't you afraid to marry into old Enoch's family?" cried Laura, with a voice that had suddenly become quite gay. "Just look how like him I am." And with comic eagerness she imitated his hard looks and pulled down the corners of her mouth.

But Percy looked searchingly round the circle of faces, and his look rested with an expression of admiration on Hedvig.

"Isn't the likeness, all the same, most striking in Hedvig?" he said lightly.

Not for a second did he shrink from the thought that she was of the same blood as the old usurer against whom the soul of a hunted and despairing artist had exploded its hatred before his eyes.

He was a dilettante, Percy Hill.

After the early dinner Percy had to return home at once. And Hedvig did not want to stay with the others round the coffee-table.

"No, I will leave you, so that you can discuss us more freely," she said.

Hedvig was going up to her room. She had not gone many steps up the creaking stairs before she heard the dammed-up floods of talk of her sister and brothers released. Silently as a ghost she crept back to the door and listened. First she heard Stellan's voice:

"The devil take me if I can understand Hedvig! I really did not think her capable of this."

"Indeed!" interposed Laura. "It was exactly what I expected. She used to sneak things when she was small."

Then it was Stellan again:

"Poor Percy is a decent fellow, anyhow. He only wants to get away as quickly as possible in secret. I understand that they don't want us to be present at the wedding."

"Well," said Laura, "we are sure to meet again soon—on another solemn occasion."

Then one heard Peter bang his knees together. "Yes,

yes, the money will last longer than the husband. She will soon have pots of money."

Hedvig leaned against the doorpost with closed eyes. She felt cold and stiff all over. Her disgust at the people in there who so impudently and blindly defiled her sacrifice froze her blood. And all the same she could not tear herself away from her listening-post. And all the same she devoured greedily every word of her sister and brothers. In her innermost heart there was a wild, frightened joy to hear how rich she was going to be.

X I I

PETER CASTS OUT MAJÄNGEN AND BRINGS HOME EKBACKEN

PETER the Boss had begun to frequent the observatory again. But it was not in order to watch the workers at Selambshof as old Enoch had done. No, the observatory was rather the scene of his economic dreams. With the help of the old marine glass he now and then peeped into the future. On the blackened billiard marker he made a few calculations, for the airiness of which quickly wiped-off chalk was a better medium than paper and ink. It was a sort of game. But behind the game lurked a serious purpose. Peter the Boss longed more and more to rise above the humble rank of an ordinary farm-bailiff. It is true that he had been called "Director" ever since the estate had been transformed into a limited company after the death of their father, but the change of title did not alter the facts. Peter was tired of his elementary tricks in buying and selling, and they had now become a matter of mechanical routine with him. They were simply a means of obtaining the commission which his sisters and brothers were too mean to pay him. Of course, he did earn a certain amount of money. Yes, the amount increased quite nicely, quite nicely. But all the same he felt the restlessness of one who is conscientiously capable of greater things. He had half-frightened, dizzying visions of profits of millions. The future teemed with possibilities which confused and distracted him during his day's work. He had to climb up to a high place in order to survey the situation. And that place was the observatory.

Peter used to begin his observations from the west window. At first he pretended to be there for the sake of the fine view. He was coquetting, as it were, with his shy hopes. Contemptuously his look passed over treeless and

insignificant Ryssvik. But farther away he beheld Trefvinge beyond the fine fishing water and densely wooded forests. Well grown and no mortgages! Fancy what a lot of money could be got out of that estate. Peter could not help making calculations. It was, of course, mere fancy, idle fancies . . . though perhaps Stellan might . . . he had flirted rather freely with Elvira Lähnfeldt at Laura's wedding . . . but probably it meant nothing.

With a little sigh Peter stepped to the south window. Here he at once approached a little nearer to reality. Here lay Kolsnäs, and it looked quite different, with big, bare patches in the forest, and bushes and felled trees and melancholy seed-pines on the horizon. Yes, yes, cash would be wanted there when the old lady died and Lieutenant Manne von Strekert began to sow his wild oats. Lots of timber had been cut down and the estate was mortgaged, but there was still lots more to take. Manne was a deuced decent fellow, anyhow, and Peter would not have minded making him a little loan now and then. He had a distinct sensation of pressing a bundle of notes into the lieutenant's hand and receiving a nice little IOU in return, which would give him a hold over a corner of Kolsnäs.

Yes, those were his dreams. Unfortunately Peter had nothing to spare for Kolsnäs now. Stellan immediately consumed the cash Peter could lay hands on. He was awful, Stellan. Already more than half of his shares lay as security in Peter's drawer.

At last Peter came to the east window. From here he had a fine view nowadays, since he had felled a couple of enormous aspens on the slope behind the avenue. He did that because of Ekbacken. Now he could see both the yard and the sawmill and a bit of the town behind. Peter could not help interesting himself in Ekbacken. Herman had avoided him since the divorce. It was not so easy either to enter into conversation with old Lundbom now that his trusteeship had lapsed. So Peter had to be content with what he could discover with the help of his glasses, though that was quite a lot. He saw, for instance, that the proud yacht-building Herman had spoken of had completely ceased. There was never more than one yacht, and that was Herman's own *Laura*. Well, the name was, of course, painted out, which really was not to be wondered at. That tall figure

over there was Herman himself. He would stroll out on to the pier and sit for hours with a glass and a bottle beside him on the green seat. Sometimes he went out sailing for a couple of days, and then the boat would lie rubbing against the pier with sails up whilst half the pier was littered with empty bottles handed up out of the boat.

Peter shook his head in joyful concern.

"Poor boy!" he muttered. "Breakers after a storm. This will never end well."

Neither did it.

Peter soon saw that activity in the shipyard decreased. The repairing slips began to be empty for long periods, the capstan struggled with its long arms as if it were begging for help from all the four quarters of the compass, and the crane hung helpless over the water as if in expectation of an inevitable fall. And the few workmen visible were mostly loitering or sitting smoking on the sly between the weathering stacks of boards round the sawmill.

Peter was quite touched at this decay. He felt an agreeable compassion for the excellent Herman. It was not his fault that all this misery might turn out to his advantage and to that of Selambshof. For if the resistance of Ekbacken was broken, then Herman could no longer foolishly oppose the advance of the town. And in that fact Peter secretly already saw his great opportunity.

Peter had felt a profound emotion when for the first time he fully realised that the town over there was smoking and sweating in order to increase the value of Selambshof. From that moment he began to think that the smell from the glue works on the other side of the lake was rather pleasant. The glue works was the first outpost of the town, and with one blow it had broken the spell of the silent little Mälare bay. What would it not bring in its train? Damage to property, stolen boats, poaching, brawls, servants in trouble. And worst of all the horrid smell. A southerly wind was a real trial to Selambshof nowadays. Stellan called it the sirocco. But Peter thought in his heart that the smell was rather pleasant. It smelt of money, money. But as he walked and sniffed it, he grew impatient with the sirocco all the same, but not in the same way as ordinary people did. On the other shore, things moved along deuced quickly, he thought. But on this side Ekbacken can't resist

for many years. And the town may expand in other directions.

It was a close day in July. There had been a bad drought this summer and the fields at Selambshof were half scorched, and promised a failure of the crops. Between the drooping and dusty elms of the avenue there was a smell of carrion and old cheese. The whole estate was enveloped in a vapour of putrefaction. The glue works over on the other side of the lake vibrated in the heat haze and seemed to dissolve in mere smells.

Peter suffered from the economic sirocco worse than ever. He could not even remain in the observatory, but had to go out for a walk in spite of the heat. How were things going at Ekbacken? Eagerly but carefully he spied round the corner, afraid of being seen, and cursing beneath his breath the high wooden fence that Herman had built towards the road. Then he moved on farther in order to see how the town was behaving. Well, at last the new quay was ready. But how was building progressing on this side? Peter ferreted amongst the dumps of macadam and the blast holes. He searched for newly-staked-out building sites and for new foundations. No, there was not enough progress to record. Why did they not hurry on the work more? It irritated him to see the workmen lying with their coats under their heads sleeping amongst the stones after their lunch.

Peter returned home by another way. He took a dull, ill-kept road, far back from the lake which led on past the old quarry between the bare hills. Unsightly, ragged, untidy, the hill rose up, useless for all but the crows. The black smoke from a goods train puffing up the incline on the other side drifted slowly in between the dwarfed and miserable pines. Peter stopped a moment in the damp cold that rose even in the hot sun out of the fens of Träskängen. He struck his stick on the dried-up lumps of clay on the road and stared in front of him. He had suddenly got an idea. The railway! he thought. The railway! This corner is farthest from town, but I have got the railway. I attack Ekbacken from behind. I am finding gold on the rubbish heap!

He staggered home as in a delirium.

A few days later the shareholders of Selambshof were summoned to a meeting. Peter told them in a few words

that he had found a buyer for the quarry and Träskängen. "That rubbish is not worth keeping and we need money to cover the bad season," he said. Nobody had any serious objection, and the sale was made. The buyer was Peter Selamb, through an agent of the name of Thomson. Mr. Thomson got very favourable terms of payment. Then there appeared an immense white board up in the quarry overlooking the railway, and bearing the words :

SOLBERGET AND MAJÄNGEN

BUILDING SITES FOR SALE !

Majängen Building Co., 3 Nygatan, Stockholm.

Peter the Boss had thought it suitable to make this little change in the old place-names.

At the same time a magnificent system of wide, intersecting streets was marked out with neat, white-painted posts and iron stakes.

Strange to say the sites found a ready sale, for it was during the golden time of uncritical speculation in suburban land. And evidently there were some poor, overcrowded, shut-up souls for whom even the quarry and Träskängen was a taste of liberty and of nature.

The whole autumn, winter, and spring, the money dribbled in regularly. "Majängen" was a splendid coup. But Peter did not sit down on his gold hoard and purr. On the contrary, he became more and more restless as his banking account grew. He kept all his money in ready cash. With this ace of trumps in his hands he watched eagerly for the best moment to play it and gather in a fat trick. His glass almost burnt in his hand when he directed it towards Ekbacken. During many soliloquies he roamed restlessly about outside the cursed high wooden fence. Yes, yes, it reeked of an exquisite decay from afar. But why did not that stupid Herman come to Peter the Boss ? If he had only known how willingly Peter would have helped him ! It was not right of him to forget an old friend. Just fancy if Herman had been foolish enough to throw himself into the arms of one of the banks in the town, which would just hold his head above water for a time in order to let him sink afterwards, and then march off with everything !

This thought worried Peter the Boss cruelly. One day,

when he had seen Herman sail out with the usual case of bottles, he went straight through the high wooden gate and in to old Lundbom in the office.

Lundbom sat there, aged and grey-haired, with a worried expression.

Peter stretched out a big and honest hand.

"Tell me all," he said. "You can rely upon an old country neighbour. I am Herman's friend, though he does not care about me. I want to help him as much as I can."

Lundbom had always had a sort of tender regard for Peter. He had taught him to play "vira." He had been his legal adviser. With a sort of impartial pleasure he had seen his knowledge boldly applied by his clever pupil. In his theoretical eagerness he had been rather proud, though he was himself the soul of honour, of his being able to show Peter certain loopholes and snags. Old Lundbom symbolised, as it were, the fate of law in this world: to be made use of by rogues.

Peter stood there with outstretched hand, and Lundbom really could not help seizing it, though Herman had forbidden all communication with Selambshof.

"What's the position?" grunted Peter. "If I can do anything I must know the position."

Lundbom shook the ledger.

"There were losses last year already. This year will be still worse."

"The figures?"

"Thirty thousand last year. At least fifty thousand this year, if things go on like this. Now we are selling out our timber below cost. We are hard up for ready money."

"Have you any specially difficult payment to make?"

"Yes, on Saturday week, a bill for twenty thousand. Fancy, we who never used to touch bills before."

"Who has got your bill?"

Lundbom mentioned a small, notorious, usurious banker. Peter whistled. That bank proved that Herman had not known how to look after his business in town properly. He rose and pressed Lundbom's hand.

"Good-bye! Not a word to Herman about this. He must be managed carefully, poor boy. Good-bye!"

A week later Herman came back from his sailing trip. He was once more sitting on the pier. The twilight was

strangely yellow. In the south a big, grey-black cloud floated, so heavy and solid-looking that it seemed a miracle that it did not fall. A warm but strong south-easterly wind had sprung up after the day's calm. The leafy mosses of the willows on the shore turned in the wind, and yellow-crested waves beat with foreboding insistence against the slimy green piles on their sloping stone ballast. Then the foresail halyard of the cutter began to lap persistently against the mast—a sound which, in a badly chosen harbour at night, threatens to cast you adrift and to shift your anchor in the dark.

Herman was sitting with outstretched legs. His chin had sunk into his sweater and he stared motionless out over the water. Over his whole being there descended a chill shadow of loneliness which gave a touch of melancholy and appeal even to his warm yachting-shoes.

He stretched out for his whisky-glass, but checked his groping hand and muttered something to himself about a renewal, a commission, and nine per cent. He came no farther. There he stopped. He refused, from a kind of spite, to think any more than was necessary to keep things just afloat for the moment. It was also from some foolish spite that he had sought the assistance of an ill-famed bank. "That fits in with me best," he thought. "For everybody thinks I'm an impossible person."

Ugh! Business . . . banks . . . the whole town!

He felt such a strong desire to take flight in his boat again that it hurt him. Alone! out into the storm and darkness!

At this moment a massive figure came walking out along the pier. There was something disarming even in his way of dodging between the holes in the rotten floor-boards of the pier. His little, round, wrinkled head hung on one side between his enormous shoulders—as if it were drooping from sheer compassion. He somehow looked like an enormous child. He stopped and looked at Herman with two small watery eyes that threatened to overflow.

Herman jumped up when he caught sight of the newcomer; he drew himself to his full height, erect and rigid as a post.

"What do you want here?"

Peter stretched out his arms, which resembled thighs on which hands had happened to grow.

"Look here, old boy . . . why should we go on like this . . . two old friends like ourselves? . . . You know I couldn't help things. . . ."

Herman suppressed his angry impulse, and, with a shrug of his shoulders, sank back on the seat staring once again out over the water where an old, black-tarred, firewood smack was just taking in her top-sail and slowly turning into the wind with dark sails booming.

Peter seized the opportunity of sitting down on the seat without further ceremony.

"You mustn't think I am on Laura's side," he assured Herman. "She is a handful, she is, without a heart in her breast!"

"I have never asked to hear your opinion about my divorced wife," said Herman in a voice that was meant to be frigid.

But, all the same, there was a corner in his soul where Peter's words did good. He could not hide his wound. Peter noticed it at once. So much sensitiveness he had left from the time of the Great Fear. Yes, yes, that is the after-swell, he thought, and moved closer up to Herman, ready to give him another dose. Then it suddenly started to rain—big, whipping drops. Herman rose silently, taking his glass and bottle with him. Without looking at Peter he walked quickly up to the house. "I don't mind your being short with me if it soothes you," thought Peter, and followed him faithfully up the steps and into the smoking-room.

Herman put the bottle on the table, threw himself on the sofa, and stared at his toes.

Peter took the matches and lit the lamp. Then he went into the kitchen, and returned with a couple of bottles of soda water and a clean glass. After that he filled Herman's glass and prepared one for himself. "Your health!" he said.

Herman drank deeply without replying. Then followed a moment's silence. The rain drummed against the upper windows and rushed down the rainpipes. A cool damp penetrated into the close room.

Peter took a cigar out of a box and lit it.

"I'll be damned if I don't stay the night, old boy! It feels jolly to be back at old Ekbacken again!"

Herman was still mute, and seemed absorbed in the opposite wall. But when Peter drank he drank also. And

that happened often. Peter thought the whisky tasted good. Yes, it really was very jolly to be sitting here at Ekbacken and see old Father Hermansson's treasures gleam behind the glass of the cupboard in the corner. He was already drinking Herman's health with the delightful sensation of being host himself and of being more secure in the place than Herman. Not that he was thinking of business to-night. He could save that up for to-morrow. No; now he gave himself up to his feelings and the whisky. And it was no small amount of feeling that he showed.

In the intervals between draining their glasses, Peter suddenly began to abuse Laura again. Was this mere calculation on his part? Did he sit there in cold blood and sacrifice the sister for his own profit? Was he, with his diabolical cunning, playing upon poor Herman's love and hate? No; Peter really began to realise Herman's loneliness. Was he not himself a poor bachelor too? He felt real pity for Herman. Why shouldn't he curse Laura, if it did any good to this poor devil—and to himself, also, by the way? He sat there working up his⁴ fury at the recollection of his sister's old sarcasms. Like a mad bull he tore fiercely and passionately at the red tissue of lies, caprice, ingratitude, and cursed coquetry called woman. Yes, it was a relief to him to take his revenge on the whole of the abominable sex that turned up its nose at Peter the Boss, but ran after such scamps as Brundin.

With a stiff expression of disapproval, Herman sat and listened to Peter's disclosures concerning Laura. But he listened all the same—he could not help it—till at last he banged his fist on the table so that the glasses jumped.

"Be quiet!" he shrieked. "She is the mother of my child!"

Peter sat for a moment puzzled; he gasped and blinked his eyes. Laura was evidently played out. He must change his front.

"Herman, you are a gentleman!" he muttered at last admiringly. "I'll be damned if you're not a gentleman!"

What was Peter the Boss to do now with all the vague emotions that rose in his massive body? Some use must be made of this beautiful intoxication. Yes, move at once to the other extreme. He overflowed with sympathy and brotherhood and memories from boyhood. "Do you re-

member when it rained, and we were playing in the loft at home?" "Do you remember when we climbed into the rigging down in the shipyard?" "Yes, that was in the good old days, old boy!" "We have had a damned fine time together all the same!"

Here Peter's eyes filled with tears, and he slapped the old fellow on the back and swore that a helping hand from Peter the Boss would not be lacking. Herman made no opposition. He suddenly looked terribly tired. He had been so utterly, miserably lonely. Though he still felt suspicious he had no longer strength to resist. Peter overpowered him by his sheer weight.

Peter forgot to remove his hand from Herman's shoulder. He felt a great, vague exaltation. At that moment he really loved his dear old Herman. He felt an irresistible desire to do something for him. The observatory, Majängen, and his errand to Ekbacken—all were forgotten in this moment.

"Look here, Herman," he muttered in a thick voice, "I saw little Georg the other day. In his fourth year. Sailor blouse, and a whistle on a white cord. Your image. Wouldn't you like to have a look at him? Laura is going away, so it is easy to arrange. He can stay for a few days with the nurse at Selambshof. That's not a bad idea, eh? Now, do say yes!"

Herman had not wanted to see his child. In his injured pride he had refused for three years to allow himself that crumb of comfort. Yes, he had almost imagined that he hated the baby. Now he sank down with his hands in front of his face.

"To-morrow," he muttered. "To-morrow, before I change my mind."

"All right! To-morrow, old boy. With milk teeth and whistle and spade and pail and all the rest of it. Come up to Selambshof and have an afternoon whisky and soda, and then you'll see him."

Peter rose. He stood there like a lump of dough, massive and swaying to and fro, and would not let Herman's hand go.

"To-morrow, old boy, to-morrow. Welcome!"

Then Peter the Boss walked home to Selambshof.

But Herman swept bottle and glass on to the floor and

then sat motionless as a statue and stared into the night and thought of his son.

There are men who are fat for slaughter and there are those who are fattened by the slaughter of others. Peter the Boss certainly belonged to the latter category. But heavy and sluggish blood may still leave you a victim of softer feelings. And Peter had, as we have seen, his weaknesses. But the strange thing is that somehow when it came to the point they always served his purpose. He could yield to any excess of feelings because the real Peter the Boss remained safely behind on guard. Whilst others awoke with remorse and a splitting head, he realised through the lifting mists that he was on the point of doing a fine stroke of business.

Big and good-tempered, he now stood in his soiled flannels and wide-brimmed sombrero by the corner of his house and looked at the touching group on the terrace. He was contentedly fond both of the fair little thing between the sand moulds and of that tall, unhappy Herman who had—God help him!—dressed up in morning-coat to meet his son. Perhaps it was because they were both equally helpless.

Herman sat there rigid and pale, torn by conflicting emotions. He did not try to explain who he was. He did not even dare to take the boy on his knees; he only looked silently at the vivacious open face and the chubby little eager hands. A living memory of the past! There they had mixed their blood, he and the woman from whom he would never escape as long as he lived.

There was a sighing of the wind in the old maple above the rusty signalling guns. Here Laura had sat, and there up the avenue he had come—always with that strange anxiety in his inmost heart. Herman leant back on the bench. A feeling of resignation stole over him. Here at Selambshof he had met his fate—and here he would still find it. Here were beings against whom it was no use fighting.

Peter coughed before he came up to them, a wonderful act of delicacy on his part.

Then the nurse came to put little Georg to bed. Herman started up as if in alarm. He lifted the boy up in his arms as if to kiss him, but put him down again and sank back on the seat beside Peter.

"I hope you have not talked about me—you have not told the nurse who I am," he muttered.

"Not a word," Peter assured him.

But Herman felt all the same a pang in his heart. "Then Laura won't hear of it," he thought. "And she won't be forced to give me a thought." And he hated himself because he could not help feeling a cold emptiness. In one draught he emptied the glass before him.

But Peter carefully slipped into business. He did not, of course, speak at all of Herman's bill that was due, or of the affairs of Ekbacken. He only said that he had met somebody who wanted to invest about fifty thousand crowns on good security. And then he had thought of Herman at once. Times were difficult and working capital always useful.

Herman did not seem to hear at first. Then his face contracted at the thought of this wretched business. And then he suddenly assumed the cold, severe, business-like tone which is so often found in very impatient people.

"Terms? Interest?"

"Not bad—six per cent.—"

"If I am to consider the proposition I must have half to-morrow against my promissory-note until the bills of sale are redeemed."

"Aha!" thought Peter the Boss. "There you gave yourself away. I should never have said that."

"Well," he muttered, "you might get about twenty thousand at once."

Herman felt that this was easy. He glanced suspiciously at Peter.

"Who is this benefactor? Does he prefer to remain unknown?"

Peter smiled and looked transparently honest.

"Not at all; he is O. W. Thomson, director of Majängen. I can vouch for him. Decent fellow. I shall be pleased to arrange the business for you out of gratitude for all you have done for us at Ekbacken."

Herman suspected that Thomson was Peter's dummy. A few days ago when old Lundbom, encouraged by a certain visit he had received, had hinted vaguely at Peter, Herman had sworn that he would never have anything to do with Selambshof. But before he walked home that evening he

had all the same arranged for a meeting. He was not strong enough to resist.

The following day it appeared that O. W. Thomson had gone away. The matter could not be arranged until two days later, that is to say, the day before the due date of Herman's bill. And then Thomson was in a bad temper. He demanded eight per cent. and only a month's notice. It was risky. Peter had done what he could, but that confounded Thomson was quite impossible. There was nothing left for Herman to do but sign and rush off to the bank.

Peter continued these friendly potations with Herman. He enjoyed his company very much, and showed a touching interest for his welfare—yes, he really ministered to his weaknesses.

"You have been living in hell, Herman," he said. "It has got on your nerves." (Yes, Peter had actually found out that there were such things as nerves.) "You must take care of yourself, sleep, amuse yourself, go sailing. Lundbom looks after the business. He is a magician, old Lundbom."

"As if it helped to sail," muttered Herman, as gloomy as the Flying-Dutchman.

But he did go sailing, anyhow, and Peter went too, and did not let go of his dear Herman. And when now after long stormy cruises out to sea they had dropped their hook far out in a fine night harbour under some rugged cliff and the waves roared on the pebbles on the shore and the crescent moon shone over the sea, whilst the evening sky hung green and cold over the long, ragged forest edges in the west, then they both revelled in a beautiful and romantic hatred of the town, its dirt and stuffiness and humbug and misery. It was a most beautiful accord between shyness, laziness, and weakness on the one hand and instinctive, furtive self-interest on the other. To Herman the town meant rubbish, masons' walls scrawled all over, insidious threats against the idylls of his childhood. But it also meant his great smouldering trouble, neglected duties, and a bad conscience. For Peter, on the other hand, the town meant ten thousand possibilities and the fine opportunities which Herman must not suspect. He liked to finish off his exhortation with little edifying stories, terrifying little accounts of the cursed banks.

"Yes, beware of the banks, Herman," he exclaimed.

"Bills here and bills there and not a moment's peace. One fine day they get you into their clutches and then you have to say good-bye to everything. But we will defend ourselves, old boy. We know a few little tricks, we rustics too, now don't we? If you get into difficulties don't make them offers. There is nothing so dangerous as to make them offers. No, you come to Peter the Boss and he will stand by you. Not an inch shall they have of Ekbacken and Selambshof."

Herman sat there eating his tinned food, half touched, half suspicious.

"Yes, but you have already sold some of it."

Peter smiled a superior smile.

"Don't you understand? I tricked them—tricked those town scoundrels splendidly. Sold away the rubbish heap in order to sit more securely in the Castle."

There Herman had got something to sleep on. And in fact he did sleep better than usual. It was as if Peter had lifted the worries from off his back and taken them on his own broad shoulders.

Peter also snored soundly. He had not by any means done everything he might have done to ensure and isolate his victim. Never! He who liked Herman so much! No, he had only been jolly decent and said what he knew Herman liked to hear.

And when Peter afterwards came into town and told everybody he met that that fellow at Ekbacken was far too fine for business, and that he had such damned bad luck in all he did, it was not done at all in order to destroy the last remnants of Herman's credit and make him even more impossible than before. He merely felt so frightfully sorry for Herman that it was impossible for him to keep quiet about it.

But the whole manœuvre was, as a matter of fact, quite unnecessary. When, toward the autumn, cash again began to run short, Herman simply had not the energy to go to anybody else but Peter. The mere thought of going to cold strangers made him shiver. And Peter did not say "No." He really surpassed himself. Herman got all he wanted at once on the security of a new mortgage on Ekbacken, though this time with lower interest and a more reasonable notice of calling in.

Herman was really moved when he went home. Fancy

if it had been Laura who had repented and forced Peter to this. Yes, he really lived on this fantastic dream through the whole of the autumn. Poor Herman, his pride had been dealt a severe blow.

But a great calm had descended on Peter after his former restlessness. The sirocco no longer irritated him. He had only to wait for the ripening of the fruit now. Soon he would be able to free Herman from all his worries about Ekbacken, which only made him unhappy.

Whilst waiting, Peter made little dreary excursions to his little gold mine "Majängen" and "Solberget."

It was mostly poorer people who had ventured out to the new suburb. They blasted, and dug, and sawed, and hammered in nails. Quite a lot of queer-looking cottages had already been hammered together down in the marsh and up in the quarry. And there were already geraniums in the windows and children on the doorsteps. Peter shook his head, smiled, and pondered. "They build," he thought. "That's a mistake. They ought to buy from those who overbuild themselves. But they are decent people all the same—quite decent people." He moved on carefully among the blocks of stone and the clay holes in the staked-out streets. He stopped before an arbour consisting of a few recently planted lilac bushes of the size of broom, in front of a patch of golden nasturtiums in a cleft in the granite filled with soil.

Peter the Boss really felt quite touched. It is strange how poetic poverty can be—in others. Fancy how simply one can live. Yes, they were really quite comfortable here in Majängen and Solberget. Peter actually began to feel a benefactor of all these people. "Goodness, I wonder if I did not let those sites go too cheaply!" he thought.

Meanwhile Ekbacken was ripening, as I have said before.

One day towards winter Herman came up to Selambshof and wanted more money. But the end had come. Peter had not a penny free. To crown it all, that fellow Thomson came to Ekbacken a few days later and called in his fifty thousand. Herman ran over to Peter again. He had no hope. No, in his heart he knew that Peter and Thomson were one and the same. But he went nevertheless; he had nobody else to turn to after the way he had managed his business in town.

Peter grew furious with Thomson.

"I shall go in to town and lay down the law to that scoundrel," he said.

As might have been expected, Thomson would not move. But Peter returned with a new proposal.

"I have managed to interest a few old boys in Ekbacken," he said. "They are prepared to take over the whole thing, and there will still be a nice little sum left over for you. You will escape all trouble and worry, and get a little pile of thousand-crown notes that you can do what you deuced well like with!"

Herman sat there pale and with trembling hands.

"Yes, but the house . . . the boat. . . ."

"Well . . . the old boys want the lot, of course. . . ."

Herman started in alarm, like a child that has been left alone out in the forest. His home! . . . His memories from childhood . . . the memory of Laura . . . the boat . . . his retreat, his consolation!

"No, I will never agree to that! It is too damnable!"

He rushed out of Selambshof. He roamed about the roads. It was a snowless winter day, raw and windy, when everything wears a frozen, worn face without the peace of age. He stopped and beat the dry thistles on the roadside with his stick. "I have been a child," he thought. "A weak, obstinate, helpless wretch. But now I must become a man. Now I must go into town and fight for Ekbacken, tooth and nail."

He hastened towards the town, walking and running, but as he approached the toll bar his steps became slower. The old hopelessness, laziness, and cowardice crept over him again. "What's the use?" he muttered. "Everybody is expecting my ruin—the workmen, the foreman, Lundbom, Peter . . . everybody. . . . What's the use?"

Huddled up, shivering, crushed with shame, he slunk into Ekbacken by a side path. He sank groaning into a settee and swallowed a glass of undiluted whisky. And out of the whisky came a thought—the thought of flight and failure, but also the thought of a thousand possibilities.

"America!"

Peter the Boss had been right in his calculation. Three days later the business was settled and Herman received twenty thousand crowns.

"You saved the slam anyhow, old boy," said Peter, "You saved the slam anyhow."

He was pleased with himself for having helped a friend in difficulties. It hurt him that Herman went about looking drained dry. And then those stupid America plans. Why the devil should Herman want to go away? With whom was Peter now to drink his whisky during the long winter evenings? Who would be with him when he was out sailing in his new yacht? Herman, who knew the boat so well.

"It will be empty after you, Herman," complained Peter—"damned empty!"

But for once Herman stuck to his decision, and so the moment of farewell arrived. Peter was down at the station. Herman was already at the carriage window, filled with an impotent bitterness both sharp and dull. He had been a hopeless failure, fit to be plucked and cast aside. Laura and Peter had taken everything away from him. And in spite of it all he had not got the strength of mind to hate them. Yes, when he saw Peter's coarse face, swollen with emotion, he positively did not know what to believe. "Perhaps he has really done what he could for me," he thought. "And it was rather decent of him to come down here so that I need not be quite alone."

Then the engine took its first deep breath as if it were challenging the distance it was about to cover.

Peter wept. He could not let go Herman's hand.

"Good-bye, old boy! Take care of yourself now. Good-bye, Herman!"

And then old Hermansson's tall Herman was swept off the stage.

But Peter the Boss drove slowly home in Brundin's old dogcart. He was both sad and glad. When he had passed the toll bar he fell into a solemn mood. The short-cut across Ekbacken was open to him now. Somebody ran to the gate to open it for him. He drove past the house on the lake side and past the landing-stage and the old office. Dusk began to fall, and Peter felt suddenly very sorry for himself. What had he not undertaken! Fancy looking after all this. The road now ran along the lake. Peter held the reins very loosely, and by and by the horse stopped. It was perfectly still, and the lake was on the point of freezing over. A big, cold, glowing cloud hung over Kolsnäs and was reflected in

the glassy surface of the water. The heavy clatter of a horse's hoofs on the floating bridge floated out into the quiet of the evening. Peter sighed deeply. He envied Herman. Fancy travelling about with twenty thousand in your pocket. He will see something of the world. But I, old peasant, will never get abroad anywhere. I sit here in old Selambshof . . . and old Ekbacken. . . .

XIII

TORD'S EXILE

LATELY Selambshof had not been as quiet as usual. The scattered brothers and sisters began once more to find the way back to the ancestral home.

The fact of the matter was that the estate was growing more and more valuable every day. The town had already begun—to Peter's great joy—to encroach upon a part of Ekbacken. Now it began to stretch its arms around Selambshof. And, like old King Midas, it changed all it touched into gold.

Yes, it was extraordinarily pleasant to sit there and feel how you were growing richer and richer every moment. And then they had to look after their interests, keep an eye on each other, and especially on the honourable director of Selambshof Limited.

It was curious to watch the Selambs when they were together. They quarrelled terribly, but stuck together all the same—just like the Bonaparte family. None believed another. They laid mines and counter-mines. They tricked one another until they got even, so that in the end a sort of rough natural justice prevailed. Peter the Boss now sat in the prisoner's dock as a result of a too barefaced falsification of the accounts of Majängen & Solberget Ltd. Laura unhesitatingly accused him, in the clearest and most spirited terms, of being a false old thief. Stellan's sword play was more skilful, and he got in a whole series of neat little thrusts, each one of which would have been a sufficient indictment in a prosecution for misrepresentation and misappropriation. Peter smiled complacently at these accusations, which he regarded as so many pleasant expressions of recognition of his merit. He lied with a certain heavy grace to this assembly of expert connoisseurs. Behind all his lies lay all the same the truth that he had really done great things for

Selambshof. And he realised that in their inmost hearts his sisters and brothers knew they must look up to him, Peter the Boss, as the eldest and the head of the family. And, after all, the whole quarrel was sunk in the great and glorious consciousness of the daily increasing value of Selambshof.

But towards the spring these meetings were not quite as agreeable as usual. That was the fault of Tord. Yes, the despised, neglected, almost forgotten Tord down there in the "Rookery" began to cause the high family council very serious anxiety. He had dismissed the Bohemian painter who had been a parasite on him for several years, and instead he had returned with a woman, a slovenly creature who spoke a sort of Norwegian and who was a very dubious person. Well, that might have passed if Tord had not got the mad idea of marrying her. The Selambs had had a terrible shock when they saw in the paper the reading of the banns. And now a fortnight later they were sitting by a big wood fire in the icy hall of Selambshof and knew no more than that Tord had driven to town with the woman that morning. They might already be married by now, though the sisters and brothers had been told nothing. Really, it was extraordinary behaviour. . . .

Let us now see how Tord Selamb had come to do this most unexpected thing: arranging for the banns to be read and going to church to be married.

The story really begins with the severing of Träskängen and the quarry. Peter had in some way tricked Tord into being absent at the meeting when the sale was decided on. This put him into a fury which increased in violence when Tord saw the secret retreat of his youth defiled by boundary posts, trenches, blasting, and disgusting hordes of insolent intruders. His protracted fury finally resulted in some immoderate and indignant articles in the yellow press. Tord was not, of course, indignant that people should be tricked into living on a marsh and on a refuse dump. No, he was furious because of this encroachment upon his dominion of boxes of lizards and frogs. He tried to enlist science in his cause by clamouring about some rare marsh flowers and a unique diving-bug. It was a vehement defence of the wilderness and an infuriated battle-cry against the town. And the whole concluded with some mixed

reflections of a hermit's spleen, pseudo-science, artist's slang, and bad nature-lyrics.

The articles were, of course, anonymous; but Peter recognised the author from certain attacks and exposures. He was not ungrateful for this valuable free advertisement of Majängen and Solberget, which must now appear to the uninitiated as a glorious paradise in the wilderness. But for the sake of order he made certain representations to his youngest brother which resulted in a quarrel, during which Tord gave vent to his excitement by letting off his gun, into the air, it is true, but still a gunshot.

Filled with a new indignation, Tord continued his articles, and painted on the wall the devil of capitalistic greed despoiling nature, with features which resembled those of Peter the Boss to a nicety. He began to develop a taste for writing. He suddenly felt that he was meant to be a writer, and was at once seized with a violent contempt for the art of painting. It is true that all he wrote, except those violent articles of propaganda, was cast into the editor's wastepaper-basket, but that only increased his irritation without in any way convincing him of his incapacity. After a quarrel with his old painter-friend over the relative values of the two arts he, without further ado, kicked out the disgusting parasite who had tricked him into wasting the most beautiful years of his youth with such rubbish as the crayon and the paint-brush.

The painter was gone. Libations with Peter were over. Tord was alone—quite alone with his foxes and crows and mice in the gruesome "Rookery."

He got into the habit of making long excursions into the town—the detestable town. Nothing like it had happened to him since he had slipped out there as a boy in profound secrecy for some devilment. At that time he had had a strange, secret partnership with some unknown vagabond, in whose company he had pilfered in the market-place and cut holes in sacks of flour down by Skeppsbron. He remembered the latter especially because of the strange, soothing satisfaction it afforded him to stand there in the twilight and feel the cool, velvety flour running through his fingers into the mud. He had already begun to revel in destruction, perhaps from a precocious instinctive hatred of all the culture on which society is based.

Tord hated the town, but not in the same way as Herman,

to whom it meant lawsuits and a bad conscience. Tord did not suffer from his conscience. No, he had an instinctive hatred of all the adaptability, refinement, co-operation, and methodical work for which it stood. He detested the great complex machine in which men are only cogs. It was the complex purposefulness and relative common sense of teeming civic life which tormented him.

But Stockholm was becoming a great city, and as such it had another side. It was a jungle, a wilderness of stone, the home of the thronging masses, and of cold emptiness by night. But the town began to exert a certain fascination over Tord. He was going to be a writer, as we know, and those who can do nothing else can always explore the special vices of the imagination. He discovered that loneliness in a crowd has many joys for a fastidious individualist. The masses are necessary, so that we may look down on them. In the crush of humanity we dream so easily of the lofty heights from which all below look like creeping things. It is always so with the dreams of sterile genius. It would begin at the top, forgetful of all that lies below.

So much for Tord and the throng. But he did not hold out long. He soon relapsed into restless despair. He was frightened by the very masses over which he had just triumphed, and fled, full of loathing, home to the "Rookery."

No, it was better in the emptiness and the cold, stony landscape. To stroll about in the deserted outskirts of the town in the uncertain spring twilight, when the masses of houses rise up like huge banks of darkness in the waning light and the street lamps look like giant submarine lilies which have collected all the cold, phosphorescent light. To drift about on still summer nights when the lamps are out and everything sleeps at the bottom of a green sea, where the desires of our dreams move silently like great fishes. The town in storm and darkness when the lonely wanderer, stimulated by drink, imagined himself lord of this brooding, deserted world of stone! The town as landscape, as nature, as the hunting-ground of all the wild instincts. The narrow back street defiles, the dark ambushes of the doorways, the snares of the public-house and the bordel. Hazard, adventure, vice, women! Yes, every evening the town was a great wild jungle where the chase of women was permitted. Tord pursued this chase with a restless and obstinate interest.

He had the lonely man's long vision for a woman's shadow. He could follow one after the other for hours, but without being able to approach her. He was consumed by an envious hatred of the enterprise of others more bold. He returned home dead tired, embittered and lonely, lonely. . . .

Nevertheless, it was in this hunting-ground that Tord Selamb at last met his fate. It was one dark, rainy, icy-cold evening in March. Hot and cold, heedless and obstinate, he followed a woman. But it did not end as usual. The dark shadow would not allow itself to be caught ; it did not suddenly vanish in a doorway. The figure in front of him only walked on and on, against the wind, restlessly, without goal or purpose, it seemed, but sharply dismissing all who accosted it. Now and then it dived into a dark back street, or crept into a gateway, but more from caprice than to escape its pursuers. The purposelessness of its roving movements fascinated Tord in quite a peculiar way. It was like a beast of the forest, he thought. He had not yet seen its face, but its step was young and springy. This was really no idle loitering. It walked with the conscious energy of one who is angry, and mumbles disjointed phrases to itself. Then it walked towards the southern heights of the town. Then steps and a square with melancholy sighing trees, and then a cobbled back street with a few yellow flickering lamps on posts at the corners of the ramshackle old houses. It was a cul-de-sac, terminating in a big wooden barrier. Below glimmered the rough wet sides of the hill, lit up by the lights along a flight of steps on the other side of a deep, dark, shaft-like yard. The woman did not appear to notice Tord. She took something out of her pocket and hurled it down into the depths. It struck the stone with a faint metallic sound. Tord was now standing beside her. What had she thrown down ? The question burnt his lips, but he remained mute in spite of himself. She turned round and was about to resume her progress when a sound was heard from the black bag she carried in her hand. She suddenly pulled out a little grey kitten and kissed it.

" Kirre ! " she mumbled ; " darling little Kirre. . . . "

The kitten was Tord's fate ; it broke for a moment the spell of his dumbness.

" What did you throw down ? " he asked suddenly.

She carefully put the kitten back again, and answered

without looking at him, straight into the chilly darkness, but in a tone of triumph and determination :

" It was the key."

" What key? "

" To the studio, of course. Beastly, disgusting creature ! Now that's done with at last ! "

And then came her story, disingenuous, straightforward, unblushing, and with a strong appeal. She had been living with a sculptor who had recently returned from Paris. She had been with him the whole winter. Oh, how she had spoilt the beast ! Cooked his food and been his model all the day. She was posing as a young witch. " And everybody said I was a splendid witch," she exclaimed, whilst an angry little smile flashed beneath the dripping brim of her hat. But what had this beast of a sculptor done when his lump of clay was ready ? He had gone to an uncle in Kalmar to get some money. He would be back in a few days, he said. But no, not a sign of life for a fortnight. She had been sitting there, cold and starving, in company with the witch under her damp cover. But now that was over. Now she had stuck a knife and fork into the witch's hands and an empty bread-basket on her head and the sculptor's old pipe in her mouth. And now she had left, and only taken Kirre with her. And down there lay the key, and it was impossible to find it again.

" So now you will have to get food for me and the cat and a roof over our heads," she said quickly to Tord.

Tord asked for nothing better. For once he did not feel anxious or suspicious. She seemed to him like a hunted animal. She was like the fox he had freed from the trap and taken home.

He took her home to the " Rookery." Not until the following morning did he think of asking her name. She was called Dagmar Bru, and was the daughter of a Norwegian musician in Copenhagen, she said. Probably some dissolute fiddler who scraped in some low-class restaurant. Her mother she could not remember. She had worked at a lace curtain factory before she came to the sculptor. Tord could get no more out of her, and he did not press her. He loved hearing how she had hated the mill. There was style about her—something wild and free. A beautiful witch ! She had fair hair—plentiful, luxuriant, rough hair. A real mane. It

was rather uneven, for she had simply cut it off where it was entangled. Any jewellery she could find she put on, just like a savage.

Dagmar stayed at the "Rookery." Tord would not let her go. He loved her with a love that consisted largely of scolding and sulking, and which was therefore sincere. He needed her. At whom otherwise could he hurl his bitter reflections on Woman? Once, when he had been worse than usual, she threatened to go back to her father, the musician. Then he felt how terribly empty it would be not to have her as a butt for his reproaches. He became frightened—frightened to the bottom of his heart lest she should throw away the key of the "Rookery" as she had done that of the studio. And then he suddenly did something that he had never dreamed of before. He asked her to become his wife.

Dagmar said that marriage would be something quite new—one might always try it.

So they had the banns read, and drove to church on the same day as the great family council met at Selambshof.

Laura was warming her toes on the fender, and quickly swallowed a third cup of coffee.

"Tord is an egoist," she exclaimed in a tone of moral indignation. "He is an awful egoist. He has no regard for others."

All agreed. Stellan's ever-watchful irony seemed to have vanished. He found nothing ridiculous in such words on Laura's lips. He felt, with a queer sort of bitterness, that in Tord the Selamb egoism had declined from the high plane on which it was assured of success in the world. He was dangerous, Tord—he did not hide what ought to be hidden, he unmasked them all; he was a caricature of them.

Peter stood watching in the window. He made a sign. A cab came driving up the avenue. It was Tord and that woman. No doubt about it. Tord wore a white tie. It was the first time they had ever seen him in a white tie. And the woman had a bouquet of flowers in her hand. They had come from church. . . .

Stellan stamped on the floor.

"Damn him! He must get out of this. I can't have him within five miles' distance of my mess and my club!"

"We ought to have let the police take that woman," fumed Laura. "And Tord ought to be in some kind of home. Hasn't he even tried to shoot Peter?"

Peter had kept silent the whole time and looked very mysterious. Now he thought the right moment had arrived.

"I was out duck-shooting a week or two ago," he grunted. "It was at a place called Järnö, which lies far out to sea. A fine island. And it is for sale. Fancy, if we put Tord in a boat and took him out there. . . ."

At that moment somebody stepped into the hall. It was Mrs. Dagmar Selamb in an open fur coat, white silk frock, and somewhat down-at-heel shoes. She did not look at all nervous or anxious. There was something light-hearted, something irrepressibly care-free about her.

"How do you do?" she said. "I thought I would call whilst I still had some decent clothes!"

She was greeted by amazed, icy silence.

Dagmar shook her fair mane with a little flash of impatience.

"Perhaps it seems strange that I haven't brought him with me. He is playing with his Japanese mice, poor fellow, and in his new black evening-dress, too! We must excuse him. 'I won't go up to those bourgeois!' he screamed. 'But I am going,' I said. 'They have done nothing to me,' I said. Well, and here I am. The whole family is assembled, I see. . . ."

Again a few moments of the same silence. Dagmar's features were at last overshadowed by a certain doubt as to whether she was welcome.

Then Peter suddenly stepped up to her and took her hand.

"Congratulations!" he said; "congratulations!"

And suddenly all of them smiled, struck by the same thought as Peter. They were splendid, those Selambs. They realised at once that it was important to gain an ally.

"You can't be very comfortable down in the 'Rookery,'" said Laura.

Dagmar threw her coat on a chair and sat down by the fire.

"Oh, it's good enough for us."

Peter followed Laura.

"But how would it be to have your own place?"

Dagmar laughed.

"I see, you want to get rid of us!"

"It is for Tord's sake," continued Stellan. "We had thought it would be a little surprise. He is such a lover of nature. . . ."

"I suppose it is somewhere at the end of the world," asked Dagmar.

"Not at all," Peter cut in. "It is out in the skerries by the sea. You couldn't have a finer view. And such lots of game—sea birds and capercaillie and hares and foxes. That would be something for Tord. Fancy to be one's own master and live exactly as one likes. . . ."

Dagmar's eyes suddenly lit up.

"The sea, you say! And do you think I could go out every morning and lie down quite naked in the sunshine?"

"Of course, that's just what I mean."

Dagmar was too absorbed in her thoughts to hear Laura snigger.

"I am perfectly mad on lying naked in the sunshine," she said in a serious tone.

"Good! Then we agree?"

"Yes; I like your proposal very much. But how shall we manage to get Selamb to agree? He is so crazy sometimes, poor fellow. You simply can't imagine."

"Oh, be careful in the beginning," said Peter. "Flatter him a bit. Tell him that he has money enough to buy his own estate. That he ought to free himself from that cursed fellow, Peter the Boss. But our little sister-in-law will know better than I what to say."

Dagmar rose, smiling, pleased with the cunning which she would display.

"Good! There's my hand. I shall be like a snake. Good-bye, all of you. He must have something to eat. I think you are jolly nice, all of you!"

With that Mrs. Dagmar Selamb went out in her shabby shoes—not without a certain savage grace.

And so they bribed Tord's wife on her wedding-day.

The solemn family council laughed and laughed. Laura writhed. "'Lying quite naked in the sun!'" she screamed. "'I am mad on lying absolutely naked in the sun.'"

The laughter was soon followed by a quarrel, one of the sharpest in the history of the family council. And, of course, it was on a question of money. Tord had nothing but his

shares in Selambshof, no ready money. There was first a keen debate as to who ought to collect the purchase money. Peter sat silent and let the others talk. Yes, Peter the Boss had suddenly become strangely indifferent. His cigar seemed to absorb him completely. This was a mock battle that he did not mind them fighting. He knew very well that he was the only one who had ready money. At last he said quietly that perhaps he could manage to scrape together a little.

The others suddenly grew suspicious of Peter's indifference.

"You have been arranging the whole thing beforehand! You think you are going to make something out of this! You are going to cheat Tord!" they cried.

Peter defended himself like a bear amongst a swarm of bees, half conscious of his guilt and half pleased, but without feeling their stings very much. He blinked his eyes, grunted, and beat them off with both his hands.

"Good! Don't let us talk any more about it. I am not a member of any smart clubs. I don't entertain. I like my whisky and soda with Tord even though he does shoot at me occasionally."

"Don't talk nonsense," Stellan cut in. "What conditions have you thought of?"

"A moment ago I was really prepared to buy some of Tord's shares," Peter said reproachfully.

"At what price?" asked Laura, with a sneer.

"At par," grunted Peter. And it was as if he had torn this offer out of his bleeding heart.

His sister and brother laughed ironically, pitilessly. It would be very nice indeed to be able to buy the shares at that price. No, at least double. They were consumed by a noble indignation. They were full of fight in the cause of poor Tord. Peter was laid on the rack and was mercilessly compelled to offer more and more. He pulled faces, puffed, swore, writhed, but it was all of no use. Selamb against Selamb, diamond cut diamond. Finally they set to work coolly and keenly without the aid of lies. Things went so far that there were threats of dismissing the manager from his post. They all thought they had been cheated by Peter. Now was the opportunity for revenge. He was forced to give a binding guarantee of one hundred thousand crowns

for half of Tord's shares and not to take any commission on the purchase of Järnö.

Thus unconsciously Tord did a good stroke of business whilst he sat there feeding his Japanese mice—thanks to the envy of his brothers and sister.

As things turned out there was no need to handle Tord delicately. He agreed at once when he heard of an island full of living creatures. And the sea! That would be something for his poetic bent. And when Peter, who had done all he possibly could in the matter, came and put the sixty thousand crowns that were left after the purchase of Järnö into his hands, he was so astounded that he forgot his suspicions for a whole week. Then for the first time he began to tell Dagmar that that cursed Peter had, of course, cheated him, though he could not say exactly how.

He was, as a matter of fact, right. Peter had at the last moment got Järnö five thousand crowns cheaper than his sisters and brothers were told. So he earned a little on the business all the same.

Thus Tord moved out to Järnö with a lot of cages. He had a whole menagerie. And Dagmar looked rather like a tamer of wild animals.

The old, dilapidated dwelling-house lay in a little garden among the small patches of cultivated ground below the rocks in the southern part of the island. Tord could not live there. It was too tame—too close to his tenant's little red cottage. No; they must build a log hut of coarse timber on the highest cliff, a real eagle's eyrie, with a view over his estate of rock and water!

Here we shall find him later on, just as before in the old "Rookery" by the muddy bay of Lake Mälare—but all the same as if grown greater by the sea and the winter loneliness.

PART II

LAURA ENTERTAINS

L AURA cast a glance down the esplanade before she pulled the blind. She had moved to Narvavägen now. It was the most fashionable quarter.

The September evening was clear and cool. The prosperous-looking windows in the house opposite threw back discreet golden reflections. The little church at the corner looked like a luxurious, bigoted, needlework box. The recently planted trees of the esplanade were as like each other as soldiers in a row marching in column formation out towards the fields.

Laura sighed faintly and contentedly. Everybody was back in town. The season was beginning.

She switched on the light. The cream-coloured blind completed the circle of coquettish intimacy. She sat down at her dressing-table. In the mirror she saw a face which still retained the seaside sunburn. It suited her well, made her hair still fairer and her teeth whiter. Laura was now a woman of thirty. There was something of the fair Renaissance type in her plumpness, something at one and the same time crude and refined. Her quick smile was full of health and light impudence.

But just now Laura was not smiling. On the whole, women are never so serious as when they are occupied with their personal appearance. During the siege of the Legations during the Boxers' rising in China it is told that a lady stole yolks of eggs, whilst people died of starvation all round her, in order to preserve the colour of her hair. That is serious.

Laura always had a long *tête-à-tête* with her face before she paraded it in public.

She became very impatient as somebody hesitatingly fingered the door handle and little Georg at last stepped in.

Georg was very like his father. He had his long face and fair eyes. In this case the weaker had been the stronger. It looked like Nature's revenge. She had always the image of the wronged father before her.

Georg smiled the hesitating smile of the neglected child. There was a certain shyness about him as he crept up to the mother.

Laura's face hardened as she turned from the mirror.

"Don't touch me! You soil my clothes."

Georg humbly drew back.

"Mummie darling, may I stay up a little longer?"

"No; you must obey Sofi!"

"But, Mummie, why must I always go to bed when people come?"

"That's enough. Run away now. I'm in a hurry!"

He went slowly, looking troubled, but he stopped at the door.

"May I sit and play in bed a little at least?"

"All right! but run away now."

Then Georg went to bed. And in bed he sat and drew a picture of his mummie as a hobgoblin. But then he grew frightened of what he had done, and drew her as a princess. And when Sofi came to pull down the blind, he lay awake in the twilight and listened to the guests. He was accustomed to lie in the darkness and enjoy Laura's parties through closed doors.

Georg had not always been so lonely.

Just after the divorce, whilst Laura still felt her position to be delicate, she had cultivated the ladies, well knowing that it is they who make one's position. Then she availed herself of every opportunity to pose as a deserted mother with her little baby. But her baby grew up and the ladies bored Laura. Nor did they feel very much drawn to Laura. It was not that she made any mistakes. On the contrary, at first she was very careful about her reputation. But she made her friends restless in some way. They did not like to see her entertain their husbands. They gradually held aloof. Only the eccentrics and the Bohemians among them remained faithful to her, including a fashionable woman sculptor and a middle-aged baroness who wrote causeries on the fashions.

Thus there were mostly men at Laura's little parties.

She realised this with a shrug of her shoulders—a contented shrug. As a matter of fact, she always felt at home with men. But little Georg was not an additional attraction for them. He was still exhibited now and then as an almost newborn babe. But in the end the sweet little baby grew too long in the legs. And then Laura began to keep him out of sight. She came to think of him more and more as a tiresome encumbrance. She even grew ashamed of this reminder of her age and of her past. Georg was under the care of untidy, uncontrolled, and incessantly changing nurses. When Laura was travelling she boarded him out with strangers wherever she might happen to be. And when she entertained he was put to bed to be out of the way.

Laura had resumed her work in front of the mirror. As the delicate task advanced towards the finishing touch with the powder puff and the choice of perfumes and jewels, her serious expression grew in solemnity.

Her movements became more deliberate, like those of an officiating priest. All these pastes, creams, essences, and perfumes were sacrifices and incense in a secret cult. The dressing-table was the altar and the image in the mirror was the god. And just as a worshipper at the altar ponders over the past and questions the future, so it was at her dressing-table that Laura became absorbed in recollections and sought inspiration for her future plans. Her face thus participated very intimately in all she did. When she thought of herself it was quite naturally of her hair, her mouth, her eyes, that she thought. Her egoism flourished under the spell of the mirrored image. The shadow and the reality merged imperceptibly together. She was sitting at the high altar of feminine selfishness.

Then Stellan arrived, dressed in a dinner-jacket. He stepped without ceremony into the holiest of holies, patted Laura approvingly on the neck, and threw himself down in an empty chair beside the dressing-table. You could scarcely have seen that he was over thirty and that his life during the last years had been rather stormy. His face still bore an expression of self-satisfied, smiling irony. Only the corners of his mouth had set, not into earnestness, but into hardness.

Sister and brother had not met during the whole summer. Laura tore herself away from the mirror with an effort.

She looked at her brother searchingly. It was as if she looked in vain for something in his face.

"And now you have become a balloon pilot, too," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders. "How did you get that idea into your head?"

Stellan played with a small lady's watch of about the size of a sixpence.

"Well, I did it in anger. I had to sell the Ace of Spades, and it got into the papers. So then I found a way of cutting out the cavalry. They look simply ludicrous down below on their horses."

Laura did not answer Stellan's smile.

"Do you know what I thought when I read about your folly?" she said. "'Oh, are his affairs in such a rotten state?' I thought."

Stellan frowned.

"No, dash it all, don't think it is a subtle form of suicide. Rather, then, as a new phase of my notorious passion for gambling. I must have excitement. It is a game with a rather higher stake than usual, that's all. . . ."

"Well, but how are your affairs?"

"My affairs!" said Stellan, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I have no affairs—only debts. But they are of no importance, anyhow. Just sufficient to keep me from getting fat. They keep one up to the mark."

Stellan's financial position was bad. And still his superior airs were not all pose. He did not worry over his position. If he had done that he would have been lost. It never occurred to him to refuse himself anything; on the contrary. He, Stellan Selamb must, of course, live up to his position. The best was, of course, always for him and his like. It is an enormous source of strength to have such an inborn conviction. Because you usually get what you consider should, as a matter of course, be yours.

It was this elegant microcosm of upper-class prejudices that kept Stellan afloat.

Laura looked at her brother with something almost resembling admiration. His assurance, his elegant bearing, his haughty smile, impressed her.

"There is an easy solution," she said in a significant tone.

Stellan suddenly looked bored. He understood only too well what Laura meant. The great day of settlement was

approaching when he would have to produce the heiress, in anticipation of whom he had drawn so many bills.

"Damn it!" he muttered; "you too! My colonel attacked me the other day, and asked if I did not mean to get married. He must have heard something alarming. And do you know what that idiot Öhrnfeldt said the other day when I got him to back a bill for me? 'It is your duty as an honest man to marry a rich girl,' he said. Not bad, what? I am a positive enigma to those honest souls. They think I have let several fine chances slip through my fingers."

"Well, but why do you neglect those . . . chances?"

"Ugh, it goes against the grain to do what everybody expects me to do. I think it is ridiculous!"

Laura did not answer. She resumed her task at the mirror. There is, all the same, something artificial in Stellan's recklessness to-night, she thought, not without anxiety. Because she also had lent him money. Not much, certainly, but more than she would like to lose.

Stellan sat silent a moment, staring at the absurdly small lady's watch, which seemed to have absolutely nothing to do with anything so serious as time. Then he rose as if he had suddenly noticed what time it was.

"I suppose Manne is coming to-night?" he said.

"Of course."

"Good! . . . Laura, you must see that one of your financial friends backs his new bills. Manne must have money."

"Yes, because if he has any money, you will get some too. Isn't that so?"

"Well, Manne still has delightfully bad luck at cards."

The guests began to arrive.

Laura's home was a meeting-place for some younger financiers and a certain set of officers introduced by Stellan. Great interest was shown at Laura's in aristocrats in financial difficulty. And sometimes the play was high.

Laura was a charming hostess at these highly original men's parties. She enjoyed queening it over these men with a future or a past. She flirted gaily and without sentimentality with both Mars and Mercury, with a secret leaning towards Mercury. Yes, in the company of these moneyed men Laura was perfectly at home. She enjoyed the cool, rapid talk of investments and bargains in shares. Their lightning

estimates and calculations gently stimulated her. She was buoyed up and sustained by these speculative chances. She constantly swayed between pleasant irresponsibility and instinctive calculations. Her cool and sparkling head exercised, in the last resort, a natural and easy domination over her senses. She played with bold assurance, with her womanliness as the stake.

Yes, Laura liked gambling, but she liked the winners still better—winners who understood how delicately to share their gains. Since she had observed that her fair type made a special impression on Jews, she had deliberately begun to cultivate "the little black boys," as she called them. This was the period of the first national, industrial boom, and "the little black boys" were making larger fortunes than ever. Because whatever happens in the world it is sure to make the Jews wealthier. And Laura kept to the fore, and was given many a helping hand and many a hint which she did not neglect to use to her advantage. People thought that she liked to risk small sums for the fun of the thing, but secretly she carried on a systematic and extensive business by which she had collected a not insignificant fortune.

The last comer in Laura's circle was Jacob Levy, the lawyer.

Levy was a business lawyer, still quite young, but obviously a man with a future. He had a large, but finely chiselled nose, dark brown eyes, and thin, ironically curled lips. His was an international face—a face which seemed as if for generations it had stared itself tired in all the markets of the world. Though born in Sweden, Levy spoke with a certain accent. His father was a Danish Jew and his mother came from Poland. The ancient Swedish title of his professional rank seemed incongruous in him. He was a cosmopolitan, and money and the hazards of money were his real home and country. Behind his mask of pale indifference lay a passionate will and a cool, sharp observation which sometimes got the better of him. In the most impersonal tones he would utter extraordinarily insolent truths, which sometimes cut straight across his own interests.

Laura liked those truths, which had not yet, however, been directed against herself.

Stellan did not share his sister's taste. He detested Levy, and treated him with an icy-cold radeness which only

seemed to amuse him. They emphasised their respective vocations as officer and lawyer, and indulged, of course in most general terms, in exquisite sarcasms at each other's expense. To keep to the general is often the best way to offer personal insults. In the beginning the atmosphere was a little chilly and depressed at Laura's first dinner of the season. Financiers sat stiff in a corner and looked as if the State Bank had raised its rate, and the military kept to themselves and discussed promotions and those damned journalistic moles. The hostess herself hovered about with a little frown on her brow. Perhaps it was Stellan's irritation that infected the others. He was not the only one waiting for Manne von Strelert; everybody was saying:

"Wasn't Captain von Strelert coming to-night? . . . I hope Manne won't fail us to-night! . . ."

Good old Manne seemed to be a special attraction! At last the cavalry arrived in all its glory. The talk at once became livelier and gayer. Everybody chatted and laughed round the tall young officer with the careless and mischievous eyes. Though not a wit, there was, nevertheless, a certain distinction in all that Manne said. He was especially characterised by a kind of good-tempered acquiescence in his Fate. He was always in scrapes but still always in high spirits. He realised that somewhere within him there were numerous possibilities, but it never occurred to him to try to develop them. In his aristocratic helplessness he had a certain likeness to those racehorses which are so tall that they can never feed themselves. They simply cannot reach down to their fodder.

Manne von Strelert's character was summed up in two prominent and widely appreciated fundamental qualities: he could not say "No" and he had wonderful, glorious, never-failing bad luck in gambling. To this it should be added that for some time past the owner of Kolsnäs found himself in an embarrassing financial position. Is it, then, strange that all eyes lit up around him, and that to-night he was the greatest attraction at Laura's dinner?

Stellan occasionally reproached Manne in gentle and almost flattering tones for his extravagance. He had, during the course of years, won somewhat large sums of money from his old messmate and childhood friend. And to-night he simply could not help winning more.

They had dined early, so as not to be disturbed in their play. Manne took the hostess in. That evening she courted the army.

Laura's manner varied entirely according to the category of guests in which she happened to be moving. She preferred to take her financiers one by one, and whatever was said openly had often a hard, metallic ring about it. But with her officer friends she displayed a special abandon. With them she was the personification of reckless gaiety. Her playful coquetry and her light-hearted, infectious laughter at once threw open the gates to a paradise of irresponsibility and golden unconcern. Yes, she could be quite delightfully gay, Laura, a veritable *saute marquis* and *vogue la galère*.

Finance did not mind this apparent neglect, and watched for an opportunity to grind its own little axe.

Manne von Strekert was not the man to resist any kind of seduction, least of all Laura's. He soon began to drink her health in all sorts of drinks, and to make a series of perfectly absurd little speeches in her honour.

Laura frankly enjoyed the admiration, both coarse and refined, of her hair and shoulders, of these connoisseurs of horses and women. But in the midst of the laughter and toasts her eyes now and then searched Levy and Stellan. Nothing had been arranged beforehand. But it so happened that they had every reason to be pleased with her. There was surely—hang it all—no harm in her enjoying herself to the full with dear old Manne, who at this moment seized an opportunity of pressing her hand under the table.

Dinner was over, and the party was just rising from the table when Manne noticed some little pink shells that had been brought in as ash-trays. He filled one with the last drops of his champagne.

"One more toast!" he exclaimed. "A toast for the little pink shell and the eternal line of curve."

And with his hand Manne indicated round his lady a very significant wave-line.

Laura pushed back her chair, and stood there with her bare white shoulders and a seductive smile. She lifted her soft arms as if waltzing.

"Yes, I appeal to you, gentlemen, am I not round?"

"Indeed, indeed!" sighed Manne, and kissed her shoulders.

"Then you must see how one of our youngest Parisian painters has imagined me," she laughed. "I made a little trip there a few weeks ago. . . ."

All eyes turned upon Levy for a second. They knew that he also had been to Paris a few weeks ago. He looked quite unconcerned.

"The most modern art is like an unshelled chestnut," he said—"green and full of prickles."

"I look like a starved green skeleton with mauve-coloured frost-bites," Laura interposed eagerly, with her cheeks a little flushed.

"I told the great master that it was not kind of him to make me so angular. Then he bowed and said: 'Art is free, Madame, and on this occasion it has not been able to take any notice of your roundness.' Yes, that's what he said. But come with me and look at the masterpiece for yourselves."

With the whole troop of laughing men after her Laura ran through the yellow drawing-room into her little reading and writing room where she had hung the curiosity. She opened the door quickly and almost stumbled over something that lay across the threshold.

It was Georg. He had crept out of bed to peep at the party through the keyhole and had fallen asleep at his post. He lay there dressed only in his outgrown nightshirt and with black streaks across his knees from his stockings. There was an air of sad neglect and helplessness over the whole emaciated little figure.

"Who the deuce is that kid?" laughed one of the men, who did not know that Laura had a child.

Laura grew rigid for a moment, but quickly recovered herself and assumed as well as she could the pose of the tender-hearted mother. She lifted up the boy, wrapped him up as decoratively as possible in her shawl, and kissed his cheek. And at this kiss from his mother, Georg awoke in the midst of the glorious party. Still half asleep, he threw his arms round her neck and whispered something out of his dreams:

"Mummie . . . princess all the same."

Everybody politely applauded the group. Only Levy was silent. He stood alone and stared obstinately at the famous picture, which nevertheless was tame compared with the geometrical excesses of some later schools.

"H'm . . . frost-bites," he mumbled in a low voice. "Perhaps there is something in the frost-bites all the same. . . ."

His voice sounded quite impersonal, as if he had not known what he was saying.

Laura carried off the boy quickly. She did not stop in the nursery. From there they might hear. No, she went all the way to her own bedroom. There she let loose her anger. There she suddenly began to pinch and beat the disobedient child who had torn away the veil, betrayed, and exposed her. It was as if she had wished to take her revenge for all the annoyance and all the worries he had caused her from the moment that she was first conscious of his presence in her womb. It was as if she wished to take her revenge for all the memories from Ekbacken, which seemed to her unspeakably oppressive and outworn.

"You were told to stay in bed!" she panted. "Why don't you obey? I shall smack you if you don't obey!"

Georg did not scream. He shrank under the blows and glanced, horrified, at his mother. He did not understand. Oh, how the pretty rings hurt when she beat him. And just now she had smiled and kissed him. He did not understand. His little soul was full to the brim with strange and ghastly questions. . . .

The memory of this terrible contrast was to remain with him all his life.

Laura suddenly felt ashamed and stopped beating him. She felt a sort of gratitude that he did not scream, and she led him back to his bed as if nothing had happened.

"There, go to sleep now," she said in a tone of indifference.

And then she went back with her most charming smile to her guests.

Play started. They did not start playing cards at once. First of all they gaily laid their stakes at roulette. Laura was banker, and imitated the professional croupiers' dry: "Faites vos jeux! Rien ne va plus!"

Laura always had phenomenally good luck, and all laid their stakes as if they were a tribute due to the hostess. Then they began to play whist or bridge, which had just become fashionable, in order to pass on to *écarté* or *vingt-et-un* later on.

Stellan from the very beginning appropriated the well-primed Manne. It was interesting to see the two friends together at the card-table. Manne was no gambler. He threw down his stakes with reckless optimism and with a boyish challenge to Fate. And he swore a little in evident surprise each time he did not win. Stellan, on the contrary, was a born gambler, at once cool and passionate. Nobody who saw him at cards could fail to see that this was his great vice. His excitement showed itself in a slight pallor in his smooth, distinguished features, from which all else seemed to slip away as from a polished metal. A blue vein pulsed in his hard, clear forehead. He spoke shortly and sharply, and unconsciously raised his voice as if he had been surrounded by deaf people. Forgetfulness, slowness, or bad play drew forth his biting irony. He himself had an astounding memory for cards and a keen power of observation. He took the game as seriously as if it were a science, and he jealously guarded it as a precious joy which a gentleman should know how to invest with a certain cult. He impressed you at one and the same time as an expert and custodian of chance. Thus he developed in his friends a real devotion to play which concealed from weaker heads among them its dangerously exciting and undermining viciousness.

During the course of years the stakes had grown bigger and bigger. They started now where formerly they had ended. Stellan won, but never enough. So it was to-day again. It was usually not difficult to pluck poor Manne. But just now he had had a little spell of absurd good luck, which had decreased Stellan's winnings. And Stellan had to have cash. He then made a plunge, drove up the stakes, doubled—five times!—ten times!! One after another the bids fell. Before Manne could turn round, Stellan held in his hand three thousand-crown notes and a cheque for five thousand.

Levy had already finished playing bridge. He never played anything else. Now he was standing by their table looking on at the final spasms.

"What's this? Kolsnäs is not entailed?" he suddenly asked in an indifferent tone. It seemed as if he had not understood himself the impertinence of the question.

Stellan expected a scene, but Manne was not his usual self to-night.

"Oh no," he muttered; "it is waiting for God's chosen people."

Manne rose. He suddenly looked sober, and slapped Stellan on the back.

"You are difficult to-night," he said. "Now I must have a whisky and soda."

The art of losing gracefully never forsook him.

Stellan leant back in his chair and puffed hard at his torn cigarette. He felt his winnings like a cool shiver in his limbs.

Levy was still standing beside him with a pale smile.

"Shall we two play a little?"

"I am rather tired."

Levy raised his voice so that he should be heard all over the room:

"Are you so anxious to keep your winnings?"

Stellan grew pale with anger and had a sharp answer ready, but then it struck him that he might just as well be engaged when Manne came back for his revenge. He forced himself to a polite gesture towards the empty chair, and Levy sat down.

They continued with *écarté* and, against Stellan's wish, the stakes were high. This was something so unusual in Levy that everybody gathered around them.

Now Stellan had no longer a sunburnt, cursing, country youth opposite him. Over his cards he saw a pale, immobile mask. It was the pallor of a race fifty generations removed from forest and field, but for whom calculation is second nature. Yes, it seemed as if he had the very soul of money pitted against him. He felt all the time that his winnings were insecure and that he would inevitably lose.

Levy sat there with half-closed eyes as if half asleep, and in the end won from Stellan all that he had won, and more into the bargain. He had seen that his opponent was not at ease, and that he had had to win that evening. And that is exactly the time when one is most likely to lose. Levy had only to wait till he had won enough in the ups and downs of the game. Then he proposed higher stakes than Stellan could afford. Then it was Stellan's turn to rise from the table and take a whisky-and-soda.

"How can you find anything in this miserable gambling?" Levy scornfully flung after him.

Then he kissed Laura's hand, and drove home with the thousand-crown notes and Manne's IOU in his pocket-book. . . .

It was late. All the guests except Stellan and Manne had already said good-bye. Laura yawned openly. But Manne insisted on staying and would not go.

"Laura dear, do let me stay till six—only till six, when my horse is groomed. I must mount him a moment before . . . before . . . oh, good God! . . ."

Laura knew what was coming. Manne was going to be sentimental. The situation no longer had any novelty. She had an irresistible longing to go to bed, and with a mocking curtsy entrusted Manne to the care of Stellan, who never slept after a night's gambling. Then she withdrew.

And as Laura sat in her lace nightdress and pink silk boudoir-cap and counted out her neat little winnings on the eiderdown, Stellan and Manne lounged in their easy-chairs in front of the fireplace. The fire had gone out long ago.

The dawn was raw and dismal. Half-emptied glasses with lip marks and thumb marks, cigar ash, and stinking, saliva-soaked cigar ends were everywhere. And then the pitiless, sharp grey light peeping in through the blinds, and the cold anguish of the dry air itself in a room where people have worn out their nerves with barren excitement.

On the carpet lay a torn knave of spades grinning at them.

Manne began to talk about "the Glove." He always did at this time of night.

"The Glove" was Manne's pet name for a plump little lady who had a glove shop in Regeringsgatan. For a long time she had kept Manne at a distance, and he had been forced to purchase and make presents of an incredible number of pairs of gloves in order to win her favour. And now marriage with her was not the most impossible of dear old Manne's eccentricities. He was unfaithful to "the Glove" now and then with ladies of his own class, but he always returned to her, disappointed and full of remorse. Her diligence, thrift, worldly wisdom, and other bourgeois qualities had for him an exotic attraction, the whole charm of the incomprehensible.

Manne tried to kick away the knave of spades, and looked appealingly at Stellan with his boyish, humid eyes.

"If you only knew what a woman she is! Damn me, if the tears do not come into my eyes when she sews on my buttons. And I had promised her not to gamble again! What will she say when I tell her this?"

Stellan sat there, shivering and sleepless, with the worries of to-morrow like poison in his veins and nerves. He was sick of Manne's sentimentality. It was as if a night frost had fallen on their friendship.

"Why the devil do you tell her?"

Manne smiled a pathetic smile.

"You don't understand, Stellan. I can hide nothing from her. I can't. I should go mad at once if I did. She is my reason and conscience, you know. We won't go just yet, Stellan. It isn't six yet. And I must ride a little before I talk to her. . . ."

Manne poured out a glass of soda-water and swallowed it in one draught.

"Ugh!" he said; "how awful it all was!" And then he suddenly began to talk about old Kolsnäs, about his father, the late chamberlain, who had taken part in the battle of Dybböl, and about his poor, little shivering mother with her sewing-basket and screen and fires well into June. And he talked about their long battle on the lake outside Stonehill and about their riding trips in the Backa forest.

"Do you remember it all, Stellan? Those were fine times, weren't they, Stellan? My old home. It is a damned shame! What have I done with it all now? I am a traitor. Yes, a traitor. Curse it!"

Stellan, cold and numb, felt a shock pass through him. Was this how matters stood? Was it as bad as that with Kolsnäs?

"What nonsense are you talking?" he muttered.

Manne stared anxiously at him.

"Stellan, old man, it . . . you had better not go to the bank with my cheque . . . not to-morrow, anyhow. . . ."

"Why not?"

"Because there is nothing there—not a farthing."

"You ought to have told Levy that. He won it from me."

For the second time a shock passed through Stellan as he pronounced Levy's name. But Manne sank back in the chair staring straight out in front of him.

"I shall have to clear out," he muttered, half crying. "To-morrow I shall have to get away. What will 'the Glove' say?"

Stellan was again cool, tense, fully awake. He was one of those people who do not know the meaning of melancholy or remorse. Their egoism is so rounded and complete that such things do not touch them. Neither can they admit defeat. That would be the end of their world. Adversity to them only points forward to new opportunities to be seized.

Levy wants Kolsnäs, thought Stellan. Once again he sat there, tense, cool, and collected, with the blue vein throbbing in his forehead just as if the table and the cards were again before him. Levy wants Kolsnäs, that's as clear as daylight.

Each time he thought of Levy he felt as if he had been pricked by a spur. He hated Levy, and during these moments he was learning a great deal from him. What was it Levy had said? "How can you find anything in this miserable gambling?" Yes, that's what he said. Things which had seemed impossible before seemed all at once self-evident, final. Yes, of course, that's it, he thought. I'll trick Levy and save myself.

He suddenly looked Manne steadily in the eyes.

"Do you know what it means to write cheques like that?" he asked. His tone was so sharp that poor Manne was startled.

"No! . . ."

Stellan blurted out the worst:

"Prison, old man, if you don't find the five thousand by the time the banks open. Can you do it?"

"No; it's impossible."

"I'll try to get you the money, but on one condition—that you won't let Levy have Kolsnäs."

That was a condition that the astounded Manne agreed to with all his heart.

"No, because I think I know of a better buyer, if you really can't keep the estate. That's agreed, then. You take your ride and confess to 'the Glove,' and I will go and hunt for the money. We meet outside the bank at half-past nine. Good-bye!"

Stellan called a cab and drove straight to Selambshof.

Peter the Boss was, of course, impossible at Laura's parties. But there was, all the same, a secret channel of communication between her drawing-room and Selambshof. Peter, too, had his interests in society.

Stellan opened a window, climbed in, and sat down on the edge of his brother's bed. He looked like a fat hog when he was asleep. On the night-table lay an old silver watch, a cash-book, and a half-finished cigar. Peter jumped up and rubbed his eyes.

"What the devil is the matter?"

"Business. Kolsnäs is ripe. What will you give me if I get it for you for five hundred thousand?"

Peter was not quite awake yet, but he could always manage to appear indifferent at first.

"Damn Kolsnäs!" he rattled, lighting the half-smoked cigar.

Stellan opened both windows. He also looked supercilious and indifferent. From his manner you would have thought he was the master, rolling in money, and Peter the servant.

"Don't talk nonsense," he cut in. "You know you want Kolsnäs like dear life."

Peter felt a mixture of fear and secret admiration for his brother's brilliancy and his careless way of handling money. Stellan was, as a matter of fact, much more difficult to trick than he had believed. Peter held nearly all Stellan's shares in Selambshof as security, but he didn't own them, and there was a damned big difference between the two things. But now this fine gentleman must surely be in a difficult dilemma as he came so early in the morning.

"You seem to imagine that I lie dreaming about Kolsnäs since you come whilst I am still in bed," ventured Peter cunningly.

"I come from one of Laura's shows. It was there I saw this opportunity. The matter is urgent. Levy is after the estate. What do you offer?"

"Well, five thousand!"

Stellan laughed aloud.

"Ridiculous! I want fifty thousand."

Now it was Peter's turn to laugh.

"You are mad. You have no idea what a big sum fifty thousand is."

" Fifty thousand. Not a farthing less."

Peter began to dress. He tried to do so slowly.

" I'll send Thomson to Manne."

" Good ! Thomson will be kicked out."

" I'll go myself."

" You'll only see me. Manne will settle nothing without me. He has a horror of business."

" Well, I'll give twenty thousand."

" Good ! Levy will get the estate."

" Thirty thousand."

" Fifty—not a farthing less."

Peter whined, reproached Stellan for his extravagance, dwelt upon the fabulousness of the sum and his own miserable means. Meanwhile he calculated quickly and surely, and arrived at the result that anyhow it would be a good stroke of business.

" Well, I suppose I shall have to present you with fifty thousand to spend on champagne and gambling."

Peter sounded quite broken-hearted. But Stellan was not at all touched. He even demanded five thousand in cash. And as soon as Peter had produced the notes, he made off as quickly as he had come, so that Peter sat there and did not know what had really happened, and believed it was some fine new way of robbing him of some cash. But Stellan returned, and in three days the whole business was settled.

Manne had, on Stellan's advice, turned to the estate agent, O. W. Thomson.

" Thomson has good connections with my brother, who might reflect on Kolsnäs," he said. " But it is better to choose an indirect way, because you must not appear too keen."

At Manne's request Stellan was present at these transactions. That is to say, at all except the last and decisive meeting. For by then he had already got his fifty thousand. And he thought that Manne might as well bear the responsibility himself if there should be any trouble. The result was that Peter seized Kolsnäs for four hundred and fifty thousand only by threatening to withdraw at the last moment—offensively simple.

Poor Manne was both sad and happy when it was all over. He was ashamed to mention the fifty thousand to Stellan, and thanked him warmly for his help.

When drawing up the contract he had, by criminal negligence and ignorance, completely forgotten to safeguard the interests of the people on the estate. And this was very hard on a number of old tenants and dependants who had now no refuge but the workhouse.

He had spoken a true word of himself that night :

"Traitor, traitor to his home and to the soil that had nourished him."

And so it happened when Kolsnäs was thrown into the market in Laura's drawing-room. It was not the first estate that had suffered such a fate, nor would it be the last.

This affair had scarcely become known before Laura came rushing into Stellan's room. She was furiously angry.

"You have behaved abominably," she cried. "You have acted behind my back. Why was I not told anything? I had almost promised Levy that he should be allowed to do Manne that little service."

Stellan made no effort to defend himself. He atoned for his crime by giving his sister a beautiful bracelet of brilliants. There were several of Laura's jewels that had their little history.

II

PETER THE BOSS IN LOVE

ONE warm and calm Saturday evening in July Peter sat alone in his office and examined his books. Round about him Selambshof seemed deserted. Not a single soul had been visible the whole afternoon. But far away from Kolsnäs on the other side of the lake an accordion was heard. They were dancing in a barn and everybody was there.

Peter put it aloud. He cursed the low, mellow, rich sunshine and the still air in which so many small, winged creatures were hovering about! With his massive body he felt alone and helpless. He had often felt so of late. And then there was practically nothing else but the books—the soiled, faded Selambshof books up on the shelf by the fireplace to busy himself with. But Peter did not look only at the books of the current year; he went back several years. Their soiled columns constituted his excursions into the past, his diaries and memoirs. Here there were entries and totals at which he had always smiled contentedly. In his memory they were associated with all those who had let themselves be cheated by him in one way or another, and sometimes he had the feeling of being amongst good and faithful friends. Yes, there are many ways of fighting loneliness in this world.

To-day Peter was more than usually obstinate with his books. He had already penetrated so far back in the books that the handwriting was not his own scrawl nor that of Inglund, but a soft, elegant handwriting with almost sensuous curls and flourishes. It was Brundin's beautiful handwriting, which still made Peter feel sick. He tried for the hundredth time to enjoy the stale sweetness of victory. But it did not bring him any joy. He still had a queer feeling that Brundin had cheated him of something . . . something that Peter the Boss would never enjoy.

Then a woman dressed in white came tripping gaily across the lawn, a plump little lady with a big white bundle under her arm. She disappeared round the corner of the kitchen. Peter put out his head through the window and called out :

"Hello ! There's nobody at home there ! Come in here instead !"

Peter looked very surprised when the woman with the bundle came to the door of the office.

"Upon my word, it's . . . isn't it Frida ?"

She answered with fluent tongue.

"Yes, sir, it's Frida right enough. I have the new laundry at Majängen now—Frida Öberg, Laundress, No. 5 Solbacken. Here is the bill. Excuse my bringing the laundry at this hour, but I had promised it on Saturday. There is no change here at Selambshof, I see."

Peter stood with the bill in his hand staring at the laundress, who had begun to pick collars, cuffs, and starched shirts out of her bundle. How strange that it was Frida he was staring at, Frida of Brundin's bedroom. That white and soft creature he had one night caught a glimpse of from behind the blind in the bailiff's wing. This, then, was the Frida of his timid, oppressive, light-shy boyish dreams. There she stood, well preserved, smiling insinuatingly, plump, equipped with such charms that not even the simplest country yokel could help noticing them. Suddenly she was enveloped by a warmth as from hot irons, thought Peter. And far away at Kolnäs they heard the accordion again tuning up a dance. Then he felt a sudden furious desire for movement, to make a noise and jump about with somebody in his arms. And he seized one of the shirts and waved it about.

"I hope you have washed the wedding shirt well !" he cried out almost menacingly.

"Why, are you going to get married, too ?"

"Yes, this very moment if necessary. Don't you hear the wedding music ? Shan't we take a turn, we two ?"

With the shirt spread out before him he jumped about in a sort of grotesque dance, threw his great arms round Frida, and began to jump about whilst the wedding shirt still flapped about them. The worn floor-boards groaned under Peter's weight, the dust rose high, and the flies buzzed away frightened from the paper ball below the lamp in the ceiling.

Frida defended herself laughingly when Peter wanted to kiss her.

"No, I must go now, sir."

Peter stood perspiring and nervous, and withheld the money for the bill.

"Won't you have a look round old Selambshof for a moment? There isn't a soul at home. I reign alone here now. Come along."

He pulled her with him up to the main building and, eager and flushed, piloted her through the dusty, closed rooms where the old, gloomy, and worn-out furniture slept and dreamed evil dreams in the heat and twilight.

"It is so cursedly quiet here to-night," exclaimed Peter. "Can't you laugh a little again, so that I may hear what it sounds like?"

Frida laughed, but the echo came back hollow and scoffing from the depths of the corridors. Then they entered the green smoking-room off the hall, which resembled a thousand other smoking-rooms in so far as it contained an equipment of guns, deers' horns, elks' heads, and stuffed birds. Peter seized the opportunity to impress upon her what a wonderful Nimrod he was, and what an expert on the secrets of animal life, especially of animal sex attraction. He imitated the call of the capercailzie, he described the feathers of the mating ruff and its collar of feathers, and finally he imitated the night call of the ruttish elk and its stamping, so that it echoed through the whole of the empty house. Meanwhile he drew nearer and nearer to the door of the next room where he slept in the summer, because it was so much cooler there than in his own wing. But when Frida saw that they were approaching the bedroom she wisely stopped on the threshold, and not even the wildest and most seductive bird-calls could make her penetrate farther. No, now she suddenly remembered that she ought to have met a friend long ago. She thanked him for all the kindness he had shown her, and insisted on going. Then Peter became furious, and reproached her coarsely for her behaviour with the bailiff.

"If that blackguard was good enough, I ought to be too—don't you think so?"

A hard look came into Frida's eyes, and she hissed out as if testing a hot iron with her wet finger:

"I should like to tell you, sir, that I am on my own now and don't need to listen to anybody."

"Don't be so high and mighty. It was I who managed things so that you escaped examination when Brundin was caught, because I was sorry for you."

Peter had no proofs at all that she too was involved in Brundin's frauds, but he always seized an opportunity of boasting of his kindness and of threatening a little. Frida was not at all frightened. No, but she was too worldly-wise to issue a challenge to money and power.

She therefore contented herself with lying in a humble tone about the whole affair:

"No, I had nothing to do with that scoundrel, sir. And, besides, a poor girl can't understand all that men do. . . ."

By now Frida had already backed out on to the stairs, and as soon as she felt safe she at once adopted her most seductive manner again.

"I hope I may iron many wedding shirts for you, sir," she said, and curtsied and smiled and tripped gaily away, white, plump, and coquettishly swaying whatever was capable of being swayed.

Peter stood on the stairs mumbling curses after her. Then he climbed breathlessly up into the observatory and watched with his glass to his eyes where she would emerge from the avenue into the road. He followed the little white figure in the twilight till it disappeared in a strange black house up on the ridge of the hill over Majängen.

A woman had entered the life of Peter the Boss. He was in love, positively in love with Frida Öberg, owner of the Majängen Laundry, No. 5 Solbacken.

Peter had never been able to associate with decent women. He was frightened of the "guinea hens," as he called them. He grew nervous and hot from the unaccustomed effort of not saying anything coarse or mingling curses with his speech. He even felt a sort of fear of his sister Laura. Once many years ago she had dragged him into a set of Lancers, and that was one of his most awful memories. Even to-day he felt a shiver down his back whenever he saw a dress-suit. Thus it is clear that Peter's erotic experiences were of the simplest. They were all lost in the fog that lies between the revels of the evening and the sore head and sordid regrets of the morning.

But now he was in love, but it was a delight mingled with not a little worry and anxiety. From the very start he felt love as a threat to his purse. He had anxious little suspicions that he was now more susceptible to cheating than before. For the first time he had to be on his guard not only against others but also against himself. "Ugh, this will be an expensive business," he thought, when the longing to see Frida again came on him. "She is no fool, that little witch! She won't do anything for nothing." He positively endowed her with a calculating cunning and a mysterious, seductive self-interest. But the more difficult and dangerous he made her, the more he must love her. Peter the Boss suspected a soul akin to his own.

He had made up his mind not to appear too eager. No, I'll wait till she brings the laundry again, he thought. But time passed, until he could not wait, and began to hover about Majängen.

It was not exactly a pleasure to walk about there. There were no decent roads, but only heaps of stones and clay-holes, for the company had long ago sold all the sites, and had thus no interest in fulfilling its vague promise as to the construction of roads. Besides, the inhabitants of Majängen were rather unpleasant people. All the earliest purchasers, honest working men and small tradespeople, who had bought the ground and built upon it at too high a price, had been forced to leave their marsh-dwellings. In their place a floating population had found its way out to Majängen. The worst scum of the town population was to be found there. And Selambshof and Peter the Boss were not exactly loved by them. They rightly considered that it was his filth they had to wade in up to their knees, and that it was on his heaps of stones that they almost broke their legs. So that when in his rosiest and most gentle dreams Peter wandered about there, he was perturbed by expressive glances, tightly clenched fists in trouser pockets, and long, rude oaths at the house corners. And in the windows there teemed pale and dirty children who took their fingers out of their mouths in order to point at him as the bad man from Selambshof.

All that would not have mattered so much if Peter could only have caught a little glimpse of his beloved. But he never saw her outside in the clay; no plump, smiling face showed itself above the window curtains of the laundry up

in the "asphalt" house. Thus he had christened the big, two-storied, ramshackle house half-way up Solberget, because it was covered with asphalted cardboard outside the boards, and none of the successive owners had been able to afford to repair the outer boards, so that it remained there as black and dismal as it had been three years ago. And it was confoundingly difficult to get to it, for there were only steep, narrow wooden steps leading past the entrance, and Peter could not climb up and down them all day long in order to steal a glance through the window-panes.

"Life is hard," thought Peter. "You never meet those you want to meet."

In the end he went home and wrote a letter. There are many ways of interpreting one's feelings. Peter's was not very personal, because his eloquence was based on a lover's advertisement in a newspaper, and of course any mention of marriage was carefully avoided. And somehow the handwriting was not quite his. And he did not sign it Peter Selamb, but "Frida's own elk." That is what he did. "Never put your name unnecessarily to any document. . . ."

The answer came by return of post and was both pleasing and disquieting. Frida wrote that she was doing well, and did not need to bow down to anybody, but that she might find use for a new laundry stove of the "Orion" make and a blue silk coat with white revers. And then she allowed herself to hint at the possibility of further sympathy.

Peter fully realised the risk of payment in advance, but he also understood that without some magnanimity he would make no progress at all. So with a swimming head he sent a round sum for the two objects aforesaid. At the same time he wrote that he had found a little refuge well protected from the eyes of the world where they might meet and sympathise. The refuge was Stellan's flat. Stellan had been ordered north again, much to his annoyance, and Peter had charge of the keys. He now hurried to the elegant little two-roomed flat in Karlavägen, removed the name-plate, aired the rooms, put away all Stellan's belongings into the wardrobes, and sat down to wait.

Frida arrived dressed in the new blue silk coat and with the whole warmth of the new laundry heater of "Orion" make around her.

"I always keep my promises," she whispered; "I'm made

that way. . . . But, goodness me, how smart this is! Are you living here too, sir?"

"I have taken all this for your sake, Frida," said Peter, pressing her to him. "It has cost me a good deal."

And then at last Peter got his reward. . . .

He lived in supreme well-being in a world of peace. Late on Sunday morning, long after Frida had stolen home, he lay quite still and watched the sunlight creep across the beautiful Persian carpet. It was a strange feeling of relief; it was as if it was only now that he had at last given the *coup de grâce* to the nightmare of his youth, the stubborn Brundin.

If Peter imagined that Frida now belonged to him, without any further expense, he was mistaken. A few more such moments and she considered herself free again. And so she let him understand in a delicate way that new favours had to be bought with new offerings. Peter suffered, but he suffered more in his greed than in his affections. He was so accustomed to think that everything depended on money that he could scarcely imagine a man being loved for his own sake. He puffed and whined—but paid. He did not even try to press down her demands by simulated indifference. Such is love.

So things went on for a few months. Then one fine day Peter received a letter in which Frida herself proposed a meeting without mentioning any fresh gifts. He was just about to welcome her, feeling heartily content, when he was checked by an inward shock. He suddenly remembered some land he had once bought, when the seller, in apparent absentmindedness, had registered the transfer in his own name instead of the purchaser's.

It was the only time he had ever been completely taken in.

Peter read through Frida's letter again. It was too eager. It was not quite the same old Frida. He felt a slight presentiment of something unpleasant. A voice whispered in his ear to be on his guard. He knew what it all meant. He sat long and worried in front of the clean sheet of notepaper. In the end he wrote something about important business which prevented him from meeting her just then. After this extraordinary exercise of self-control Peter felt

very sorry for himself, so much so that the tears came into his eyes. He wandered about, puffing and sighing, among the fields of Selambshof, a victim of desire, suspicion, hope, and fear. Into the bargain Stellan wired that he was coming home immediately from the North, so that Peter was obliged, with a bleeding heart, to screw the name-plate on to the door again, and set out all the photographs of horses and ladies. Thus the discreet little free retreat for his amours disappeared from view. Then another letter from Frida arrived, in which she begged and prayed to be allowed to see her own Elk very soon. Peter was really touched. It was sweet to hear her beg like this. All there was of hunger and love in his great body stirred within him. But he felt at the same time that the thing was growing more and more dangerous. "I must be strong," he thought—"very strong." And he did not answer the letter, not a line. . . .

Peter was not left long in doubt. It was as he had suspected—Frida was expecting a child. She absolutely must see him, she wrote. She was so ill and so run down. If he did not arrange things for her at once she would drown herself. . . .

Peter sat long, staring at the letter, and it did not affect him in the way he would have thought. Instead it rather comforted him in a strange way. It cooled his desire to think of her growing more and more unshapely and ugly every day.

"Oh no," he muttered; "you won't drown yourself. I have paid for what I have had. We are square. It is high time for me to return to my senses." The long tug-of-war between his love and his purse had ended in a victory for the purse.

Peter burnt all Frida's letters, and did not answer a word. He had decided to regard the affair with Frida as a dream. And he knew he could do it. There was not a trace of proof. So wonderful was the instinctive cunning of this man that he had not sent a single line signed with his name, written in his own handwriting, or even posted at Selambshof. And scarcely once had he been seen in Frida's company. She on her side had, from the first, every reason to keep the matter secret, because a liaison with the hated Peter the Boss would at once have driven away all her customers in Majängen.

But Peter was not to escape unscathed, as he had imagined. Frida was not at all the sort of person to allow herself to be hanged in silence. For a time she continued to bombard him with letters full of entreaties and reproaches. Then she began to hang around Selambshof, big, swollen, with a sinister, spotted face and awful to see. Peter kept a sharp look out, and succeeded for a long time in avoiding her. But one winter evening she suddenly confronted him in the avenue. Peter did not even greet her, but walked on as if he had not noticed her. Then she seized him by the sleeve and poured over him a wild flood of curses and threats. There were no witnesses. Peter let the flood pass over him with great calm—yes, positively with a kind of enjoyment. Only now, when he heard her voice and saw her body, did he feel the child as something real. And in his innermost heart he no longer doubted that it was his. No, it was almost a pleasure to think how something of himself was irresistibly developing within her. He enjoyed that sensation with the last cruel glowing spark of his love. But his voice was low and ice-cold when at last he answered her. And he spoke slowly as if he wanted to impress something for all eternity upon her consciousness.

"Not a farthing," he said. "Take from what you and Brundin stole. From us you have had enough."

With that he shook her off and went away.

Frida ceased to hover around Selambshof. She adopted new tactics. She stayed at home in Majängen and talked. There was no longer any trace of silence. To everybody who came she opened her heart concerning the scoundrel at Selambshof, who would not do the proper thing. As the unhappy victim of Peter Selamb, she won much sympathy and many new customers in Majängen. Her laundry was besieged by the women, and became a sort of focus for the hatred of Peter the Boss. The whole community waited excitedly for the Spring Sessions.

But a good deal was to happen before then, and Peter would have several reasons for reflecting on Majängen this winter.

There was the old business of the water supply. It had been decided, after several stormy meetings, that water was to be laid on in the houses at Majängen. It was neces-

sary, because the wells were insufficient and tainted. Part of the necessary money had already been collected, and then Peter's permission to lay down the pipes was sought. It was considered to be only a matter of form. The streets were, of course, his; but even if he did not fulfil his promise of making roads, it never occurred to anybody that he would deny the people he had humbugged facilities for the pipes. But that was exactly what Peter did.

"The ground is mine, and if you want to put down pipes you will have to pay for them," he said.

This answer was unworthy of Peter the Boss. It could be no pleasure to have a hotbed of epidemics just outside your door. He acted in direct opposition to his own interests. But it is a fact that one hardening of the heart brings in its train others. He was furious with everything that was brewing against him in that dark charnel-house. And he hated to think of the coming Spring Sessions. And that is why he said "No"—an obstinate, sullen, impossible "No," which, as we have said, was quite unworthy of the cleverness of Peter the Boss.

This was too much. The newspapers then got hold of him. The reporters were about to catch the mood of the winter twilight. They described the horrors of the outskirts of the town, the struggle between town and country, tearing each other to pieces in an indescribable chaos, the bottomless roads, the ragged hillside, the torn pines, the maimed, squinting, hunch-backed, cold-sweating, ramshackle houses. And in the midst of it all came the Salvation Army to their red barn, with "Blood and Fire" over the cross on the door. "Starvation and frost" were everywhere, and thus the symphony was complete. Here hope, misfortune, idleness, thrift, crime, and the new life thronged together. Here the scum that the town had cast out huddled together with the indomitable spirits that boldly sought a new life on new ground. And just now, when all the good influences were co-operating, after a pathetic struggle, in a united effort to make something worthy of human beings out of their grey stonehill, everything was brought to naught by the mere word of Peter Selamb. Who was this gentleman after all? Well, he was the manager of Selambshof. He sat there in his sinister highwayman's lair and took toll from the citizens of the town, and grabbed all the land that the town required.

We are suffocating, we want air, we want to get out ! Very well, please pay up. Everybody must pay toll to Peter Selamb of Selambshof.

People did not choose their words. The newspapers outbid each other in indignation. They were, of course, right. But it is not always well to be too much in the right—not even for a newspaper. . . .

The hammer blows rained down with a frequency sufficient to fell an ox. But Peter merely blinked his eyes. He did not understand how anybody could be afraid of the Press. He had no real respect for any other kind of letterpress than that which is to be found on bank-notes and in the paragraphs of the penal code !

"Do these damned journalists want to teach me how to build suburbs ?" he muttered, with an almost compassionate shrug of the shoulders. And he did not budge an inch on this matter. "The ground is mine. If they want to put down pipes, they will have to pay."

After a few weeks the newspaper campaign against Peter the Boss subsided. It had had no effect.

As for Frida, things took their course. It is seldom that the birth of a child has been awaited with such general interest. The women in Majängen talked of nothing else when they met at the wells, laboriously to pump up the grey and ill-flavoured clay water. Round this child the hopes of the whole community for vengeance on Peter the Boss were centred.

At the end of March, Frida Öberg gave birth to a son, who was named Bernhard.

And then Peter received a summons to appear before the Court, and he arrived in a grey suit in his dogcart with old "Interest." And when he came he appeared neither haughty nor humbled.

The Court lay by the high road, some distance away from the suburb. But all Majängen was, of course, there. The crowd stretched out as far as the yard. Peter stepped forward with half-closed eyes and a good-tempered grin on his face. Nobody could say he looked frightened. He slapped some of the men on the back.

"Make room, boys ! Nothing is going to happen without me, anyhow."

A Swedish crowd is harmless when it is sober.

People stared and made way. But a coarse voice was heard :

“ He ought to be hanged. . . . ”

Peter had now reached the hall. On the other side of the long table with the judge and the jurymen sat Frida. She had a bundle in her arms. She stared Peter straight in the eyes, and lifted up the child so that he should really see it. Then a murmur passed through the hall and the jurymen put their close-cropped heads together. Peter turned away his eyes at once, shrugged his shoulders, and bowed to the judge as if to say, “ As between gentlemen, cut the whole thing short ! ”

Through his friends he had conveyed to the judge the truth about Frida Öberg. An easy-going wench, maid at Selambshof, an affair with the fraudulent bailiff, dismissed with him, vengeance, blackmail, etc.

The baby began to cry. Did Frida pinch it for effect or not ? The judge, who looked as if he were at a meeting of shareholders, glanced up from his papers with a wry face.

“ Is it necessary to bring the child here ? ”

Frida jumped up, grateful for this opportunity to make a demonstration. “ What am I to do when I am poor and alone, sir ? I have nobody to look after the poor boy. ”

The judge remarked in a dry voice that he had been informed she had a laundry and that her sister was working with her.

At last the summons was read, and the judge began his questions. When Frida once began to speak, she could not stop, but flung herself with such a primitive force and such a naïve matter-of-factness into the dismal love-story that the judge at once thought it wise to order the hall to be cleared.

Peter grinned with malicious pleasure as the angrily muttering inhabitants of Majängen shuffled out.

When Frida had finished, Peter rose, looked at the wall, and stoutly denied everything.

Then a witness was called. Peter suddenly recognised, with a certain discomfort, the porter at Stellan's house. Well, it appeared that he had never seen them together, but only believed he had noticed that they both stayed on the second floor. Peter was calm again. He had won worse cases. Then the judge showed him a love-letter signed

"Bull Elk," on the reverse side of which there appeared a part of the Selamshof receipt stamp. Peter boldly denied everything except the stamp. But he began to feel rather glum.

The parties were dismissed during the deliberations of the Court. Frida sat in the midst of a crowd of women and suckled the baby. But Peter went out and patted old "Interest." He stood there, stroking and stroking, and found it difficult to look up. He felt hate all round him like something prickly. He no longer felt safe. He would probably have to resort to . . . the last. . . .

After a long delay all were admitted into the Court again. It was black with people but absolutely silent. The oath was taken.

All eyes were fastened on Peter the Boss. He seemed to shrink and grow smaller as he stood there. Now he looked like an old bent and grey peasant. Would he do what peasants had been accustomed to do so often before in similar cases?

Peter stepped slowly up to the table. He felt just as if he were walking in a vacuum. He seemed to be paralysed in the arm when he wanted to place his hand on the Bible, the greasy old court Bible, which had seen so many things. He could not help glancing at Frida. She also had risen and taken a step towards the table. She looked at him with an expression in which hatred and anxiety mingled with a strange, cold curiosity. The child also stared at him with vacant black eyes. And a little hand moved with awkward, blind jerks. Peter suddenly thought of a newborn, trembling young fox which he had once pulled out of its lair and killed with the butt end of his gun. He felt queer, sick. He was afraid . . . afraid. . . . For a moment he let his hand fall. . . .

The judge fixed him with his eye:

"Well, what's the matter? Can't you take the oath?"

Peter started. He suddenly heard Stellan's clear, sneering voice.

"Clodhopper! In love with an old servant-girl, what? Ridiculous!"

He placed his hand on the Bible again. The judge recited the oath with the expression of one who had been offered at dinner hare that was too high. Peter repeated

it after him. He wanted to speak quickly, but he could only get the words out slowly. His voice was thick and indescribably humble, and there was in him something of the fat rat and the lascivious dog.

Frida had been quiet, surprisingly quiet, during all this. Then her voice was suddenly heard. There was no cry, no sob, no longer any affectation :

"He swore false all the same." And it sounded like a weary statement of fact.

With that the case was finished, and the defendant was acquitted of responsibility for the child. The judge muttered something to the Clerk of the Court and the jurymen next to him. Nobody in the hall moved. Peter was the first to go out, straight past all the amazed, loathing, and disgusted faces that stared closely at him. He staggered out into the cool, dazzling April sunshine. He stood there fumbling with the reins and patting old "Interest's" back, and muttered inanely :

"How have things been with you, old girl? How have things been with you? They have been playing hell with your old master—really hell."

Peter got up in his dogcart and drove with slack reins down towards the point where the road to Selambshof turned off. Then he suddenly heard behind him a prolonged, shrill, strident whistling—a sound that seemed to be pure venom.

It was a greeting from Majängen. It was the signal of a long and bitter guerilla war.

Peter had won his case—but felt all the same confoundedly dismal. He could eat nothing for dinner, though he took a couple of appetisers. And things did not improve when Stellan rang up. Fancy he had heard of it already. He was absolutely furious.

"Scandalous!" he cried. "Grotesque! That sort of thing should be settled on the quiet. You are a damned clodhopper; you make us all impossible!"

Peter put down the receiver, hurt, sad, almost ready to cry. "Abuse," he thought, "nothing but abuse. And all the same it was really for Stellan's sake that I . . . swore. . . ."

With the coming of dark, Peter began to be frightened.

He could not forget all those eyes staring at him in the hall. And every one of them knew that he had forsworn himself. Perjury! What did that matter now, when nothing could be proved. He had put his hand on the Book and repeated what that damned judge—who, as a matter of fact, was a rake in financial difficulties himself—had said. But he, Peter, had not asked to lay his hand on the Book. It was the Court that had forced him into that entirely unnecessary folly. Anyhow, he had certainly won his case. Why the devil, then, should he have to lay his hand on the Book? The Book—the Book. . . . Peter suddenly felt cold inside. The old terror of his childhood rose out of the depths of the past and seized him. He had, of course, never felt anything so noble as an honest doubt. He had never felt any sort of contact with the powers for which the Bible stood. A little piece of Kristin's and Hedvig's hard old God, the centre of Selambshof's gloomy, crippled terror, still survived deep down in his soul beneath the rich flora of lies and dishonesty. "So help me God in body and soul"—yes, that was what he had sworn. Supposing God should punish him now! Supposing he were to take away from him all that he possessed! Supposing he had to sit naked, starved, and alone in the dark forest just as he had dreamt as a child!

Peter was afraid of the God in the Book—afraid as a negro of his fetish. . . .

Oh, if only he had had Hedvig to talk to. She knew all about that sort of thing. She was the medicine man who knew the appropriate spell. . . .

The clock had already struck twelve when Peter set out to look for a Bible in the great dark owl's nest called Selambshof. From one room to another he walked, searching in every corner, but without finding what he looked for. At last he crept stealthily into the housekeeper's room like a thief, and stole her Bible from her night-table. Then he sat down to turn over the pages, greedily fastening on everything that spoke of wrath and threats and punishment. With swimming head and smarting eyes he made himself drunk with fear. At dawn he staggered, trembling and shivering, into the office, and took out a thousand-crown note out of the safe. And he spread it out so that he might really see how large it was. Then he put it in the housekeeper's Bible—at one of the worst passages. . . .

That was the way out of Peter the Boss. He tried to bribe God with a thousand crowns.

As soon as it was dark the following evening he stole towards Majängen with the note in his pocket. It would have been simpler, of course, to send the money by post. But that was not good enough. The post is such a silent and mysterious institution. He was afraid that his sacrifice would go unnoticed by the Lord. And if he could "bull" shares by his self-abnegation, that would be all to the good. So he would deliver the money himself—though, of course, without witnesses. Otherwise it might be dangerous.

Peter crept forward in the rain with the brim of his hat turned down and his collar turned up. It was really bold of him to go to Majängen now, but he was not the first whom fear has made bold. He slipped, stumbled, and stepped into holes in the darkness on the bottomless roads. Several times he thought he heard steps and whispering voices behind him. But these sounds were at once drowned in the soughing of the poor, meagre pine branches which were struggling against the storm somewhere up in the darkness above his head. Now he would reach the asphalt house in a moment. Black as misfortune it hung there over the dark edge of the cliff. The laundry was closed, but there was a light in the window. Peter was just going to sneak up the long, wooden staircase to reconnoitre when suddenly there came something whizzing through the darkness. It was a rain of big stones. Peter drew back a step, but was hit by the next shower in the back, just below the neck, and also on the head. He fell forward without a sound, and lay there in his own clay like a sack of sand.

These were the first shots in the war between Selambshof and Majängen. Fatal hits. Peter was, after all, on the way to his woman and his child. There was, perhaps, after all just a chance of Peter turning human being. . . . But then the stones intervened! . . .

Peter was found unconscious and half suffocated by the clay. The thousand-crown note still lay in his pocket, and it never reached its destination. He woke up in his bed at Selambshof. And his first thought in the midst of all his pains was: "That's what you get for trying to do good! . . ."

Peter had to stay in bed quite a long time. He had

injured his spine. He got up again even more bent, more pale, and more flabby in the face than before.

He was now a man without pity. If Peter the Boss had had before his sentimental moments, they were now a thing of the past. And he had, as it were, grown too coarse for all fear. And he procured for himself a watch-dog—a great, shaggy, wolf-like monster—chiefly for the pleasure of seeing people anxiously sneaking past Selambshof. And then the harsh barking of the dog was a kind of company at nights. For Peter had begun to find difficulty in sleeping.

III

THE ANGEL OF DEATH

HEDVIG'S and Percy's marriage had for long been unconsummated. At first in the Swiss mountain sanatorium Hedvig was not allowed to live in the same house as her husband. Later on, when he was better, she still remained his nurse.

"Think of your fever," she said, and withdrew gently from his delicate approaches. "It is your duty to get well, Percy dear."

Percy was all too far away from the thousandfold stimulant of art from which in his longing and his imagination he had otherwise derived vitality. His natural submissiveness was still further fortified by the strict discipline of the sanatorium. So he yielded, and always acquiesced in her cold, sisterly behaviour to him. But only to approach her again at the next opportunity with the same persistent, childlike, half-embarrassed supplication for love. And if he had not done so, Hedvig would certainly have felt secretly hurt and worried. After having wandered about the whole day in the pure, cold air and in the light of the white, snow-capped peaks, among the brotherhood of suffering and among the recaptured convalescents high up in the seclusion of the alpine world, it was pleasant in the evening to whisper a soft "No" to the adoring husband. There was rehabilitation in it. It healed old wounds. It was an innocent triumph. She lived through happy days. There was nothing that tempted or scorched or tore at the heart. There was just life enough for Hedvig Hill.

"No, Percy dear. For your own sake. Your temperature would rise. . . ."

And she uttered her "No" in the same tone as others would whisper their "Yes." See how I sacrifice everything for you, she seemed to say, my best years, my womanhood,

my beauty, I sacrifice all for you, darling Percy. Even to herself she made a sacrifice of her half-heartedness and her fear—though she probably suspected in her inmost heart this unsatisfied longing of Percy's was in the long run more dangerous to him than ordinary life together as husband and wife. The truth was that Hedvig Hill sipped at what she did not dare to drink at one draft. She hugged to herself the glimpse of pain she saw in Percy's glance after her refusal. She cherished the mist of pulsing blood in his blue eyes, so like those of a precocious boy. And she warmed her lonely bed with it.

Then the day came when Percy was—not cured, because a complete cure seemed almost out of question—but, anyhow, so much better that he could think of moving about in the world once again.

The doctor spoke of the south.

Hedvig felt a nervous dread of all that was to come. It was as if they were being turned out of a safe refuge, she thought. She would have preferred to remain amongst the brotherhood of the doomed, bewitched by the mountain spirits up there into a half-life in the big white monastery.

"But, Percy, would it not be safer to spend one more winter in the sanatorium?" she whispered.

Percy shook his head and smiled. He had been very mysterious these last days; he had sent off and received a number of telegrams.

"Where are we going? Wouldn't it be best to go home?" wondered Hedvig.

"You are going to have a magnificent present," cried Percy, who glowed with the pleasure of planning, acting, and moving about after years of supervision and inactivity.

So they went down into the valley when the first September days had already sprayed the woods with gold. There the train stood ready. The smoke, the noise, the jolting about soon tired Percy, who was so spoilt with fresh air and quiet. Then Hedvig turned nurse again, and wrapped him up in their reserved compartment. But that evening the train rushed into a town by the sea under the mountains. It was Genoa, and they at once went aboard a steamer which seemed to have waited only for them in order to depart.

"But where is this boat going to? Where are we going?" wondered Hedvig.

She positively knew nothing. Percy only smiled mysteriously.

One brilliantly fine morning they went ashore at white Cadiz

"Here is my present," said Percy. "It is the country that suits your hair and your eyes"

At the sanatorium Hedvig had forgotten to be Spanish. She felt terribly nervous and cast out into the unknown

"Now we will choose towns for you, just as one chooses frocks," continued Percy "We shall begin with Seville, though I suspect that Toledo would be the most suitable"

So they arrived at Seville

"I can't offer you an *auto-da-fé*," he whispered "You will have to be satisfied with a *corrida*"

Above the entrance to the *plaza de toros* there stood in big letters "Press Bull-fight in Commemoration of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary"

With eyes that still smarted and burnt from all the pitiless light on the yellow sand of the arena, Hedvig saw, within a fraction of a second, a little grey bull, with the picador's dart in his neck, bury his horns into the stomach of the rearing horse. The horse beat the air helplessly with his forefeet and lifted his slender neck and his head with a gesture of wild, maddening pain, and then fell heavily on one side with the picador beneath him, but only to rush up again and to gallop, pursued by the bull, round the arena, with bleeding sides and trailing entrails

Hedvig stared fixedly down. She was very pale

"This is horrible!" she muttered "I want to go"

But she did not go

More picadors, more bleeding horses. Then banderilleros who, dancing nimbly, buried their flag-adorned darts in the bleeding neck of the bull with subtle, playful cruelty. Meanwhile the sunlight lay like fire on the yellow sand, the red bloodstains, and the bright shawls of the women on the rails of the boxes. Even the rising metallic sound of thousands of voices seemed to be burnt through by the heat of the sun

Then the *espada* entered. With his knee-breeches, slippers, and pouched hair he seemed to have stepped straight out of a Mozart opera

Swinging his red cloth he dances an elegant death dance before he draws his weapon. Now everything gleams

bright—the sun, eyes, the thin fire-shaft of the sword. His posture, as with his weapon raised to the level of his eyes he calmly awaits the onslaught of the bull, is extremely graceful. Now the fire of the fine tongue of steel is suddenly extinguished in the bull's neck, the Colossus staggers and falls heavily.

Hedvig sat, mute and pale, with devouring eyes. She was staring at the gate from which the next bull would rush in. . . .

When they drove home in the first yellow twilight, Percy's arm stole round her waist.

"I believe, all the same, Toledo has amused itself in Seville," he smiled. "Wasn't that a fine way of getting the sanatorium out of the system?"

Hedvig pushed away his arm almost unkindly.

"Don't laugh at everything," she muttered.

And suddenly she felt a secret bitterness that the man by her side was not stronger, more robust, more dangerous, that he had allowed her to say "No" so often.

Darkness requires more heat than light. The sun, the sight of blood, the inborn cruelty of the south had all at once burnt through her shyness, her fear, and her brooding. Hunger for life buried its claws deep in this strange virgin soul that had lain so anxious and so self-absorbed. She was not the first barbarian from a twilight-land to whom the south has given a bold desire to live.

That night Sister Hedvig became her husband's lover.

They remained the whole autumn in Seville and saw many bull-fights. Hedvig was very beautiful at this time. Hers was a dark, passionate unfolding. Percy overwhelmed her with costly clothes and jewels. He dressed her up as a Spaniard with combs and shawls and mantillas. He did not touch his paint-brush, but he let her pose to his love. And Hedvig enjoyed his admiration, enjoyed her own beauty. For the first time in her life she was at peace with her own body. It was no longer the cause of restlessness and heavy care and danger. It took pride in this man's caresses. Beneath her silk and her jewels she felt the glow of her nakedness. A solemn thrill would pass through her at the thought of her own shoulders and breast. And she enjoyed the feeling of satisfaction, which was both hot and cold. Oh,

what a relief not to feel any longer that anxious longing in her inmost soul!

Hedvig Hill was happily in love with herself. For Percy also these were happy days. Their late union gave his mind a bright coolness. Perhaps he sometimes suspected the gulf which nevertheless existed between them. But that did not frighten a dilettante; it only now and then liberated a certain light self-irony. He enjoyed his own extravagant gifts, he enjoyed seeing her bloom in her own way under his hands. He felt something of the cool intoxication of the artist before his work when it has achieved independent life.

"You are my most beautiful picture," he would whisper. "I sometimes imagine I have done it myself."

The time was far away when he had lain in the shadow of death looking at her with a beggar's eyes. Percy Hill forgot things easily.

It was the evening of a clear and brilliant October day. The whitewashed walls no longer dazzled. Down in the patio of the small hotel two Spanish matrons in black were sitting talking with phlegmatic fire. Their talk flowed ~~as~~ musically and as monotonously as the little spraying fountain in the marble basin. Hedvig and Percy had just returned from a long drive towards the *vega*. The coolness of the approaching autumn suited him wonderfully well. He stood leaning against the window-frame with his hands behind his head.

"To-day I feel quite aggressively alive," he said. "Fancy if we should have a child, Hedvig—a little girl! I would much rather have a girl than a boy."

There was a slight touch of annoyance in his voice.

Hedvig sat at her dressing-table doing her hair. She felt a sudden unpleasant shock. Strange as it may sound, she had, up till that moment, not thought of the consequences of their life together, and not for a moment had she thought of herself as a mother. She let slip the knot and her black hair flowed again over her naked white shoulders. She sprang up from the dressing-table with a hard expression and frightened eyes.

"I don't want a child!" she cried. "Never—never!"

Percy wondered at her vehemence. His smile grew hesitating.

"Dear child, forget my nonsense. It is bad taste to forestall nature in that way. I only meant that I should certainly find your condition beautiful."

Hedvig had now calmed down again. She came up to him and stroked his hair.

"You must never talk like that, Percy," she muttered. "You . . . we have no right to children . . . they are for those who are healthy. . . ."

And her face had suddenly resumed the old expression of sisterly resignation and self-sacrifice.

Percy grew a shade paler. It seemed as if the climate had suddenly grown more chilly. It seemed as if the light reflected by the white walls had been reflected by snow. The sanatorium had followed even to Seville.

"Forgive me; I forgot for a moment that I was an invalid," he said.

From that day Hedvig suffered constant anxiety lest she should have a child.

Woman's egoism is more negative than that of a man—it is a real minus quantity. For she reveals her sacrifice and her devotion in the very lines of her body. Her whole body is a manifestation of generosity, a splendid promise. From the day that her breasts fill out, invisible childish lips grope round them. Within the sweet, swelling lines of her body and hips slumber the forces of regeneration. Her egoism is a barrenness, a cowardly self-betrayal, for she betrays her own body and she betrays the future.

Of course Hedvig was convinced she had the noblest motives. Of course it was the curse of heredity that frightened her. She did not admit even to herself that she would have been still more frightened had he been a healthy man, that it was her own body she was beginning to fear again, and this time not with a vague and indefinite fear as before. No, now she knew what was at stake. At any moment there might begin to grow within her a strange being that would feed on her blood, would tear her body, would perhaps bring death to her. She grew cold with fear at the least disquieting sign. She had moments of hatred of her husband. And she began to behave with a meanness and nervous caution that deprived their life of all its charm.

Percy yielded. Probably it was criminal of him to hope for children.

He did not see through his wife, or at least only half saw through her. There were perhaps dark moments when he suspected the cowardly poverty of her character, but people of his type do not pursue disagreeable thoughts to the end. All the same, Percy slowly relapsed into a restless state. He felt as if he had been exiled from the kingdom of peace and health of which he had only had a glimpse. He left Seville and began to lead a roving life in Spain and the south of France. Galleries, ruins, mountains, waterfalls. It was the same old hunt for beauty! Several times he tried to stay in one place and take up his paint-brush again. But these were only good intentions, interrupted by crises of discouragement. Towards spring they reached Paris, for which he had all the time been longing. Percy settled in Montparnasse amongst the Scandinavian painters, and talked art with feverish and excited interest. Here he suddenly fell a victim to the modern extremists, to futurism, cubism, naivism, and ultra expressionism, on which he had formerly only bestowed an ironic curiosity. It seemed as if his very refinement and submissiveness had rendered him defenceless against the latest brutalities. He began to buy the crudest objects. The strangest things were sent to their studio on the Boulevard Raspail. There was a "Portrait of a Lady," consisting of four straight, black-green lines on a pink ground. There was a picture called "Motion" which consisted of four triangular fields containing parts of a woman's leg and a locomotive.

Percy looked stealthily at Hedvig when, with eager explanations and cold enthusiasm, he showed her these acquisitions. I am not happy, his look said. This kind of art is not for happy people. It is for those who have something to avenge.

They were, as a matter of fact, so many reproaches flung in the face of life because he was weak, enervated, sorely tried, and without a future.

Hedvig had suffered all the time from his new associates, among whom she felt helpless and embarrassed. She was jealous of all the strange, poisonous indecency that they called modern art. She stared silently at the new monstrosities. Very well—he prefers all this to me, she thought. It did not merely hurt her. She had also a strange, suppressed feeling, never admitted, but nevertheless real, of becoming

free, of slipping out of his hands—~~1~~ throbbing, secret, insolent feeling that anything was possible. But with all this there immediately blended an anxious care, an old frightened care as old as the Selambshof days, which stirred within her every time he gave her expensive flowers, bought first-class tickets, or threw a big silver coin to a beggar.

"What have you given for those pictures?" she asked defiantly.

He mentioned a large sum—several thousand francs. And she went into her own room with a pale, set face.

From this time Hedvig began to insist on their going home.

But Percy continued to buy modern art. Everything was not so provocative as those first pictures. There were also pearls of bold but still exquisitely tasteful expressionism. After running about all the day at exhibitions and art dealers he sat down to drink his *apéritif*. He looked out over the murmuring streams of humanity on the big boulevards, which always make you feel that you are a poor little drop in the ocean and may be washed away at any moment. But all the same there came into his eyes a little look of anger. And he did not turn to Hedvig, who sat there dressed in black, looking stiff and disapproving, but to the young painters round the table. It was strange how the air of Paris made him free and independent.

"It's a pity it's so damned banal to make a donation," he exclaimed. "But a poor wretch like me has no other way out. I have no children. I won't live very much longer. I am an end and not a beginning, like you boys. My money has no personal future. But if I add a wing to my little art gallery and fill it with first-class explosive matter, and then present the whole splendour to the nation, or rather to the city—yes, to Stockholm—then I shall at any rate have sown the seeds of a little healthy restlessness in their minds, and a little help to you fellows. And I shall have erected a little monument to myself in the usual dishonest but generally approved way. The Hill Collection! What do you think of that idea?"

They grew excited round the table.

"We must thank you, of course! But why don't you do something yourself? You can, Percy! You are no bourgeois! Why don't you stick it out?"

Hedvig had been sitting all the time silent and forbidding. At Percy's unexpected mention of an endowment she suddenly felt a cold shiver of anger. She rose quickly.

"You all seem to forget that Percy is ill," she said. "He must not be rushed. He is much too excited here in Paris. Shan't we go back home now, Percy?"

The young painters felt a little nervous of Mrs. Hill, of her aristocratic air, her dark, nun-like beauty. Silence fell around the table. Percy rose with his little, absent-minded, apologetic smile.

"Yes; there, you see, gentlemen," he said.

And then they left.

At last Hedvig succeeded in making her husband leave Paris, where it was already beginning to be hot and dusty. There is always an element of danger in the journey home for consumptives who have been living in the south. In Stockholm there had been an unfortunate relapse in the late spring, with storm and icy rain. Percy had to go to bed at once, and Hedvig was again his nurse. He did not want the doctor. He had a real horror of doctors, and Hedvig did not insist on calling one in. She took great care that he should not be exposed to tiring visits of old artist friends, and she nursed him with quiet, inexhaustible energy. There was no more talk of the great donation, and Hedvig began to feel a certain deep calm.

But one fine day Percy got up in spite of all her protests, and in spite of his not having quite a normal temperature. And the following morning an architect arrived. The two men walked round the house, drew, measured, and made a lot of calculations.

"I want the drawings as quickly as possible," Percy said at lunch. "I am in a great hurry."

His eyes glowed, and he had little red patches in his cheeks.

The architect promised to do his best.

Immediately afterwards the pictures began to arrive from Paris. Not only those that Hedvig had already seen, but a whole lot of new ones. Percy evidently had somebody down there buying for his account.

Hedvig said nothing. She kept to herself, locked herself in, brooded, and scarcely answered when spoken to.

Still more new pictures arrived, and Percy was busy with them the whole day, studying them, and moving them from one crowded room to another.

Then the plans were ready and the workmen arrived, a whole swarm of them. They dug and blasted, laid foundations, and built the walls. Percy sat in an easy-chair out in the sunshine and looked on. He was so eager that he scarcely allowed himself time to eat. This is my protest against oblivion, he thought. I am building a house for my ashes. I am building my own little pyramid. . . .

He really imagined his ashes standing in a beautiful Japanese urn in a corner of the Hill gallery.

Towards autumn the roof was already on the new wing. Percy began to hang the pictures at once. He could not even wait till the walls had dried. He himself was not strong enough to move anything, but he sat in his chair and gave orders to Ohlsson, the coachman, who had now become chauffeur. You could see even from Ohlsson's back how he disapproved of these awful novelties. Percy did not worry. Whenever he looked in at the rooms containing examples of the older art, everything there seemed to him strangely quiet, and as it were covered over with a fine dust. His taste was already brutalised by these strident colours and paradoxical forms. He really needed strong food now, poor Percy. Fatigue sometimes descended like a grey mist over his feverish zeal. He used these new excesses as weapons against the deepening shadows.

Hedvig walked about devoured by a silent, consuming bitterness. Her feelings were a strange compound of jealousy of his overpowering interest in art and brooding anxiety at his wicked extravagance. This donation seemed to her like a challenge, like a theft from one who had sacrificed herself for him. Percy had allowed himself to be seduced, she thought. He has no power of resistance. But she dared not speak openly to him. She had a vague feeling that there was something within her that she must not betray. That is why she never went beyond her increasingly bitter reproaches that he overtired himself, and neglected himself. She wore an expression as if *crêpe* was already floating round her. Yes, Percy thought sometimes that she assumed her widowhood in advance. There was something sharp and nervous in his answer.

"Why do you insist on wearing black?" he said. "I should understand you much better in sealing-wax red or sulphur green."

Her old method of holding him was no longer effective. Hedvig again began to feel his lack of respect for illness as a personal insult. By and by they almost quarrelled about Ohlsson, the chauffeur. Hedvig began to drive into town every day in the car. Then Percy would have no one to help him, she thought. Then he would be forced to rest. This made her a little easier. One day she did something she had been tempted to do for a long time. She ordered Ohlsson to drive to Selambshof.

The avenue was full of yellow leaves. Several of the old trees had blown down, and there were ugly gaps as in a broken set of teeth.

Peter sat in the office puffing at an unlit cigar and looking at his papers. He had aged. He was bent, his face was flabby and yellow. Hedvig stood before him as Laura had done once upon a time. She could not help having been spoilt by so many beautiful and expensive things. For a moment she shivered at the ugliness of her brother. But in her inmost heart she tolerated him, had even a feeling of security in the presence of something intimate and familiar.

"Good morning, Peter!"

"Good morning, Hedvig. So the elegant Mrs. Hill visits this remote spot. Why this honour?"

Hedvig did not answer, but looked out through the window with an expression of resignation.

Peter wore a look of injured innocence which suited him perfectly.

"Is it perhaps for the last dividends? Because Levy has long ago cashed them."

Hedvig had, on Laura's recommendation, appointed the lawyer Levy to look after her personal estate, including her shares in Selambshof. And Peter did not at all like the insolent supervision of the Jew.

Hedvig shook her head.

"I am anxious about Percy," she mumbled. It sounded as if this confession had been forced out of her by a thumb-screw.

"Really; how—how is your lord and master, anyhow?"

On Peter's face there appeared a well-meaning grin of

sympathy. He summoned up all that was left of his former sentimentality, but it did not reach beyond his expression. His eyes penetrated swiftly into her very soul with a cold, familiar, insolently searching glance. Aha, my dear, they seemed to say, this business did not turn out so well as you thought. Hedvig, of course, stood in silent, dignified protest against his every low thought. But all the same she enjoyed his glance—something that groped blindly and stealthily in her vitals.

"Percy is very bad," she exclaimed in a kind of exaltation—"much worse than he thinks himself. And he has quite lost his balance. He does nothing but buy picture after picture—mad things that unscrupulous people palm off on him. He is positively throwing away all he has! It is such a dreadful shame!"

Peter was playing with his pencil. He had never heard Hedvig say so much at once before.

"You mean that Percy ought to be put under restraint," he interrupted calmly. "I am afraid that would be rather difficult."

"I shall have remorse all my life if I do nothing to help and protect him."

Peter wanted to damp what he thought was unbusiness-like vehemence.

"Pictures, you said . . . but pictures can also be good, almost as good as shares. They give no dividend, but they can rise a damned lot in value."

"No, not the pictures that Percy buys. He is being robbed by real swindlers. And then he wants to give it all away to the State. But they will never accept such rubbish. People will only laugh at us."

Peter was startled. A donation! This was damned serious. He rose panting, walked up to Hedvig, and poked his thumb into her arm.

"You . . . you ought to occupy Percy's time a little more," he leered, "so that he won't have any left for this nonsense. Why the devil are you as black and white and beautiful as sin . . . and have expensive, pretty frocks and all that sort of thing? . . . The chief thing is that Percy does not commit any folly while he is still . . . well, I mean that one can always protest against a will. . . ."

There was a certain satisfaction in Peter's grunts. He

enjoyed saying this kind of thing to an elegant lady in diamond rings and black silk. There was a sort of luxurious revenge at last in being able to speak straight out to Hedvig—the hypocritical Hedvig.

His sister did not push him away. She smelled his breath, and the smell of stale tobacco and of cheese on his old clothes. All the time she had the same feeling in the pit of her stomach as one has when one sinks rapidly in a lift. Now she had reached the bottom. She did not push him away. She stood there with closed eyes without a trace of colour in her face. She felt his shamelessness groping with coarse, hairy hands about her reserve, her shyness, and her stealthy and lying fear.

“How dare you,” she whispered in a low, hoarse voice—“how dare you say anything so vile?”

But his words stuck all the same. They crawled about, teemed and multiplied within her. They stimulated her to action and emboldened her gloomy heart.

Hedvig staggered out of Peter's hovel; she stood beneath the naked, shivering maples on the soil of her bitter youth and of her long humiliation. A dull, consuming autumn restlessness ran through her blood. The darkness of the main building attracted her suddenly as by some secret hardening of her heart. The door stood ajar above the bank of withering leaves on the steps. She entered. Everything was dim, dusty, cold, stuffy. She wandered about the empty, echoing corridors, turned the creaking locks, stole through swarms of moths between the covered mirrors and chairs and the windows which were specked with innumerable dead flies. In her own room she sank with a groan on to the edge of the old narrow bed of her girlhood. Memories of her poor, lonely, miserable childhood rushed over her with renewed strength. She felt a wild self-pity, a kind of fury clawing her breast. But she liked to feel that claw. That was why she was here. She drained the cup of pain to the last drop with voluptuous bitterness. It gave her a right to revenge.

When, as if under the pressure of a dangerous burden, Hedvig slowly staggered out again it was only to pursue the past still further. She strolled through the neglected, overgrown garden where the benches and the paths were covered with dead stalks and the trees were already robbed of their fruit. Here in the old pear tree beside the well

there was a big hole in which she used to hide her secrets—as a dog hides a bone. There had lain for a long time a broken seal out of the smoking-room and a little ring with a green heart that she had taken from Laura. In her thoughts she still obstinately defended this theft. “Had not Laura broken her fine comb? And not given her anything in place of it!” How quiet and self-possessed she had been as she sat there and Laura searched for the ring, cried and stamped. . . .

Hedvig cast a shy and searching glance around her. Then she quickly pulled off her glove and pushed her hand down into the hole. Her arm had grown plumper, and it was a little difficult to reach the bottom. With the tips of her fingers she felt something hard and managed to pull it up. It was a little bottle with a death's head and cross-bones on it. There was still something thick and brown at the bottom. It was a—souvenir from her confirmation. She had taken the bottle from the family medicine-chest after that affair with Brundin. In the darkness she often ran down to feel it. It was death she fingered . . . death. . . .

Hedvig stared at the sluggish brown drops. It was that struggle that made a nurse of me, she thought, with sudden clear vision. I had to finger—death. I was a fool. And, seized by a wild mortification, she flung the bottle on the ground so that it was shattered into a thousand pieces.

Now Hedvig stepped through a broken-down hanging gate into a road, from the rustling, leafy carpet of which there was reflected a strange, sulphur-yellow light, which seemed like the very shimmer of putrefaction. Not a human soul was visible. It seemed as if Peter had devoured the whole population. Next she stood on the cliff by the “Rookery,” where she used to spy on Laura's and Herman's kisses. Oh, she could still feel her burning mortification and her envy of her sister. Overhead the autumn breeze soughed heavily in the dark pine tops. Out on the lake sudden black gusts perturbed the surface as if in irresolute fury. But the waves beat against the shiny green stones on the shore with short, sharp onslaughts, already troubled by the thought of the moment when everything would be frozen up.

Hedvig suddenly lifted her hands as if to ward off a blow. The thought that Percy would soon die, that she

would soon be alone again, rushed over her with a vehemence as never before. Alas! to know a thing is one thing, to feel it in your heart and bones is another thing. She felt a shivering fear of the old loneliness of Selambshof. The autumn day, the decay all round her, the icy-cold shadow of death, suddenly awakened all the hunger in her blood. The memories from Seville rose up before her flame-clear on this chilly northern autumn day. Once more they swept away her cautious fears and her anxious reserve. She had a savage pleasure in standing there in the cold wind and letting loose all the black, hot gusts. . . .

And deep, deep down in her soul there was during all this seething turmoil the consciousness that Peter had given his approval, that she had the sanction of the Selamb family spirit for whatever might happen. Without that she might never, never have undertaken this stimulating and fateful excursion into the past. . . .

They had late dinner at 'the Hills'. Hedvig came down in her black Spanish dress, with her hair parted in the middle and a high comb under the mantilla. She was as stiff as an image of a saint. But she had a burning pallor, and there was fire in her alluring black eyes.

The saint drank several glasses of wine.

Percy sat mute. He did not take his eyes off her, and trembled as if before some overpowering phenomenon of nature. We are to begin again, he thought. It was not dead. From the first moment he saw her there was no thought of resistance in his mind.

When they were sitting over coffee in the yellow twilight of the intimate little anteroom she suddenly threw her arms round his neck and kissed him. He no longer wondered how it had happened, or why it had happened just then. He only revelled in his intoxication of joy, at once awful and glorious. He had a strange feeling of starting on a journey from which he would never return.

During a long, silent, dark autumn night she drank his fever like a fiery wine. She was the intoxicated nun officiating at the dark mass of 'love. Never had Percy found her lips so greedy, so glorious and unashamed.

In the morning Hedvig played with Percy, as the cat plays with the mouse. She stood there wonderfully naked in the pale sunlight from the window. Never before had

she been able to show herself to him thus. There was in the very lines of her body something wild and virginal, a shyness which made the sight of her nakedness a sort of breathless sacrilege. Percy had the sensation of beholding a martyred girl who, with her clothes torn from her body, awaits the fierce and hungry beasts on the yellow sands of the arena.

"To-day I need some air," she said, "but I don't mind walking if you want the chauffeur!"

"May I not come with you?" whispered Percy from his pillows. He looked so small in the big carved bed resembling a catafalque. "Could we not take a long run into the country to look at the autumn?"

That day Percy no longer spoke of his pictures, nor during the following days either. Hedvig did not see him even glance at the new gallery. He seemed to have grown afraid of his plans for farewell, his pyramid, the urn for his ashes, and all the rest of it.

All Percy's feelings had been transfused into a new, passionate love. Day and night he wanted to be with Hedvig. Protected by her white limbs, he huddled together in the growing shadows and intoxicated himself in the warmth of her presence. But it was a fatal intoxication. Love made everything, even death, greater, more real, more terrible. . . . It seemed as if strong hands had torn to pieces the bright, artistically woven veil that dilettantism had suspended between him and reality. He felt for perhaps the first time in his life a deep fear. But then he only drank the deeper from Hedvig's unbroken life as if by doing so he might save his own. And when he noticed that the intoxication consumed his strength instead of increasing it then he drank deeper still in order to benumb himself.

But now it was Hedvig's turn to steal into Percy's picture galleries. Yes, the rôles were strangely reversed. She positively felt attracted to her former chamber of horror. She would stay there for a long time staring around her. It was not that any artistic instincts had awakened in her. It was not that she had begun to understand any of these new paradoxes. No, but she imbibed courage from their impudent recklessness. She deafened her conscience with their excesses. "Everything is permitted"—that was what Percy's pictures whispered into the ear of a Selamb.

Life and death soar strangely near each other in love. You give and take with the same recklessness. Sacrifice and selfishness disport themselves side by side. And just at the moment when the human egoism is nearest to its dissolution it is sometimes most blindly cruel.

During these weeks Hedvig loved Percy and killed him. There came a moment when she began to be afraid to look into his face. But all the same she could not find the strength to spare him. During the day she invented many a cunning trick to escape seeing the truth. There was something round his mouth and eyes which now and then filled her with a cold terror, almost with hatred. It was the disease in him she hated. She would feel fits of cruel, invincible hunger for the moment when death would at last strike its blow and no longer creep stealthily around them. And all the same she loved him, loved for the first time in her life with a kind of dim, wild abandon. So strange is the human heart. In the midst of these fits she longed for the night, the darkness, the great, teeming, blind darkness, when she could once more draw him to her, kiss him, drink up his fever.

Sometimes Hedvig was seized by a kind of dark frenzy. Their love had resembled a silent, bitter struggle with death. Percy sank back with perspiring temples. Convulsively, like a drowning man, he would seize her black hair and stare into her eyes, which he saw in spite of the darkness, and which seemed to him surrounded by pale little dancing flames.

"My beautiful angel of death," he whispered. "My beautiful angel of death." And in his voice was a strange mixture of love, hopelessness, and, to the very last, playful irony.

One such night there came a fresh hæmorrhage of the lungs. It was the third, and Percy knew at once that it was the last. For several days he lay there white and thin, and faded away without any serious pain. The winter had come early. The light from the snow on the pines lit up the room just as in the sanatorium in Switzerland. The doctors had that all-wise and important expression which always means that they are completely powerless. Percy had recovered his little, wan, ironical, submissive smile. He did not complain and did not seem to regret anything.

He smiled also to his wife without wondering at her metamorphosis.

Hedvig had turned nurse again. Silent, indefatigable, with the expression of painfully heroic resignation of her profession, she moved silently about his bed. Not a word did they speak of what had passed between them. They were like people who have become sober, and who scarcely suspect what they have done during their intoxication.

Until one day Percy wanted to be carried out into the new gallery.

At first Hedvig objected vehemently. He was not to be moved. He could not bear the least movement. Only after persistent prayers did she give in to his whim, but with an injured, worried expression. And she did not leave him alone. Erect and rigid she stood on guard by his pillow in the hall.

Here the dying Percy lay amongst all his new art. A look of bitterness and weariness fell across his face. He shivered a little. The walls looked around him indescribably cold and unsubstantial. They seemed to radiate cold and meaninglessness. The stiffness and perverse spasms of the latest fashion in art gave him a terrible feeling of a blighted life frozen in death.

"They can never have had a fire here," he mumbled, and crept right down under the bedclothes.

Hedvig was already prepared to have him carried back to the bedroom. But then Percy caught a glimpse through his half-closed eyelids of a little spring landscape, a hill with apple trees in bloom against white walls. In the midst of all the frostiness he received a lovely impression of a pure motive, of a simplicity that was full of meaning and of quite appealing beauty. And he remembered again his promises in Paris. They again seemed to him important and binding. He took the picture with him and had it placed at the foot of the bed when he was carried back into his "crypt," as he called his bedroom alcove. To-morrow, he thought. To-morrow I will send for a lawyer and will arrange the matter.

But the lawyer was not sent for. Percy had other things to dream about. In the twilight Hedvig came and sat down on the edge of his bed. She had been into town for a while, for the first time for weeks. She looked as solemn as a

priestess. And after a moment's silence she told him that she expected a child.

Percy did not say much. He whispered thanks. Then he kissed her hand and put it on his chest. And then he lay there trying to imagine that new life that he would never raise up in his arms. But it was difficult to feel that it was true. He could scarcely imagine Hedvig as a mother. He had remorse because he did not feel this more deeply. He kissed her hand again.

Percy lived one week longer. He had several troublesome attacks of suffocation, after which he was seized by a deathlike weakness. But as soon as he had a clear moment Hedvig spoke to him of the child. It grew, it developed, it lived in her consciousness. It was a boy and he was called Percy. He was a little delicate but handsome, with dark hair like his mother's, blue eyes like his father's. Hedvig was no longer so quiet. She spoke quickly, nervously, in short, breathless sentences. It seemed as if she had tried to put her own fear to sleep. She made a convulsive and touching effort to keep death away with the last resources of her womanhood.

And still the whole thing was a lie.

One winter morning, when the snow lay thick on the ground, Percy Hill died in his wife's arms. Something seemed to make him restless during his last moments. It was not the child. No, he muttered something over and over again about the lawyer . . . the donation. . . . It sounded almost as if he had wanted to force a promise from Hedvig.

Truly pitiful was this hopeless appeal to her.

Percy Hill died a dilettante. He had succeeded in completing nothing in all his life. Not even a new will had he been able to draw up. There was only the old one that he had written the day they were married, and in which he left Hedvig everything.

And there was no child born to him after his death. Hedvig had cheated him. It was a lie of love. Yes, no doubt she believed that she lied to console him, to sweeten his last moments, and to make death easier. She was perhaps quite unconscious of the terrible Selamb logic in the fact that it was just on the very day that Percy began to be interested in his donation again that her fiction about an heir escaped her.

Exhausted by vigils and anxiety, Hedvig collapsed after Percy's death. For several days she lay unconscious. Not one of those who arranged for the funeral knew any of Percy's old artist friends. So the strange thing happened that he was driven out to Lidingö cemetery together with Peter, Stellan, and an old gouty sea captain from Gothenburg, whom he had never seen in his life.

Hedvig mourned him sincerely. As soon as she could stand up she hurried out to his grave. For months not a day passed without her paying it a visit. A rigid figure in black, she stood there under the snow-covered trees staring at his grave. Did she ask his pardon for her lie, for not laying his ashes in an urn in the Hill gallery? Did she fall back upon memories of their love—sensuous memories? Did she only try to fill an aching void with the foolish illusion of physical proximity? I don't know, but it is a fact that the tears often came to her eyes. Hedvig cried, the tearless Hedvig. . . .

Then she returned home to conferences with Levy, who was making the inventory. Percy had an old-established, solid fortune. He had only been obliged to sell an insignificant part of it in order to realise his dreams of a gallery. There was a cold, numb pleasure in hearing the clever Jew descant on funds, interest, dividend warrants, and investments. It seemed as if the very soul of gold had spoken to her with glib tongue and beautiful though ironically curled lips. After a time she began to understand with a feeling of secret, refreshing joy how rich she really was.

IV

THE COLD MOMENT

THERE was a charity fête at the Athletic Ground. The quadrille on horseback and the bicycle race were over, and now people thronged round the tombola and the stalls.

Stellan did not look up at the sky when he stepped out into the saddling yard. He did not give a thought to the balloon whose gigantic yellow silk bubble was already beginning to swell out and shimmer in the cool September sunshine. No, his looks searched anxiously amongst the scattered groups of spectators outside the ring of guards. And he suddenly muttered a half-suppressed oath at the sight of Peter, who, furious and massive as a bull, bore down on him from his ambush. He awaited the attack in the most deserted spot he could find. And a certain weariness appeared in the hard lines of his mouth.

"You have become damned difficult to find," panted Peter. But Stellan was already prepared with a smile. It is strange that smiles can thrive so many degrees below freezing point.

"You can meet me as much as you like when you have got decent clothes—and a decent face. . . ."

Peter was unshaven. His overcoat dated from the fat and sentimental period. It now hung on him like a sack. His barge-like shoes were covered with the dirt of the bad roads of Selambshof, and he had in his hand, not a stick, but a cudgel. And he shook the cudgel and struck the ground with it.

"You are damned smart, you are! But if I take everything this fine gentleman possesses perhaps he won't be quite so smart. To-morrow I want my seventy-five thousand, or else I'll make you bankrupt!"

Stellan still smiled. He pointed to the balloon, and his tone became exquisitely ironical.

"Come up with me and then we can talk business."

Peter looked with a ludicrous expression of suspicion and disapproval on the expensive and dangerous ascent in which his seventy-five thousand would soar heavenwards.

"If you were at least decently insured," he sighed. Then he suddenly grew furious again and shouted, so that he was overheard by the people round about them:

"I must have the money to-morrow. I won't wait any longer."

Stellan grew pale and came close up to his brother. It was as if he were abusing some obstinate labourer.

"You lout! You want to get hold of my last share in Selambshof! But I have already put them up another spout. Curse you, there are better and bigger creditors than you! Yes, I have nothing but debts, so my position is really excellent. The only hope for the creditors is that the bubble won't burst. But do you think it will improve matters for a shabby old moneylender to come and hang on to my coat-tails just as I am going up? No; get away and keep quiet, and I will show you something to make you think."

Stellan suddenly had an idea. He pushed aside the astonished and hesitating Peter without further ceremony, and went straight towards the steps of the tennis pavilion.

There Miss Lähnfeldt was standing amidst a group of uniforms and allowed Manne von Strelert to pay her his court. Both had taken part in the quadrille on horseback, and she was dressed in riding-breeches, which at that time was something quite new and bold, and she stood there amongst all the men, slim and slight, but with her head held high and with a proud carriage.

Stellan ploughed his way through the group. Not a feature betrayed what kind of conversation he had just passed through. The lines round his mouth were gay and slightly cruel. He saluted, kissed her hand, and said aloud, so that everybody round them should hear:

"Miss Lähnfeldt, do you remember I promised you a sensation? Come up with me to-day."

Miss Lähnfeldt wanted to appear a sportswoman. She cultivated to the best of her ability the Anglo-Saxon style. Thanks to persistent and expensive training she had really developed her little strength until she was considered a bold rider and a fairly good tennis player. She did not answer

Stellan at once, but bit her lip and cast a glance at the officers round her. But Manne protested. One had no right to tempt charming ladies into the clouds, he thought. Charming ladies might get dizzy. . . .

Stellan looked gratefully at Manne, certain that his words would only egg her on. She was not a coward, or at least she was more vain than she was afraid. And a crowd is a bellows to vanity. Elvira Lähnfeldt was one of those women who are excited by a crowd. The thought of some kind of notoriety always occupied her thoughts. In every crowd the desire to be noticed, spoken of, praised, and envied, worked like a stinging poison in her veins. When she now looked at the group around her it was in order to measure the effect of the proposal! It would surely create a sensation if she went up—a real sensation. . . .

She did not say "Yes" straight out. She answered by the eternal feminine question:

"But what shall I put on?"

"My military fur coat," said Stellan. "Besides, your riding-costume is most suitable. But come along, it is twelve o'clock and the people are waiting."

She took his arm, and they stepped out into the open space. The group behind them applauded. Manne was teased at the cavalry being outdistanced by the air force. There were several people there who were interested in seeing the two friends' position improved.

The balloon was already filled. Stellan turned away a poor journalist who had had half a promise to be allowed to go up with him, and amidst a murmur of surprise from the crowd he lifted Miss Lähnfeldt very chivalrously over the edge of the gondola. But he did not give the order to let go at once. He did not grudge his partner a few moments of exquisite joy in the polite and encouraging exclamations of the gentlemen and the little cries of alarm from her lady friends.

Then the attendants let go the ropes and the balloon rose. There was a flutter of white handkerchiefs from the dark group below in the grey oval of the cycle course.

As you know, one need not rise very high before everything down below looks small.

"What mites!" said Miss Lähnfeldt. And her voice sounded a little malicious.

Stellan cast a side-glance at her in order to gauge the effect of the increasing depth beneath them. She looked down with an expression which seemed to say, "This is nothing much."

"Wait a bit, my dear," thought Stellan. "You will get as much as you can stand." He had already made up his mind that this would not be a pleasure trip, but an adventure.

The wind was west-south-west. The balloon had not had time to rise much before they were out over Lidingön. Below him Stellan saw the shining green roof of the Hill's villa.

Hedvig . . . yes, he would have to try there too if everything else went wrong. If only Percy had been alive. . . . But Hedvig alone, no! there wasn't much chance. . . .

The balloon began to sink very suddenly. One must always be careful when passing over forests, where the air is warmer and lighter. But Stellan purposely neglected to cast out any ballast till they almost swept over the tops of the trees. That was a trick that used to impress beginners. Stellan looked again at his partner. She was perhaps a little paler than before, and held on a little more tightly to the edge of the gondola. But if he had hoped for any frightened screams and looks of anxious appeal he was doomed to disappointment.

"The balloon must manoeuvre badly," she said.

Stellan flung out ballast, perhaps more than was necessary, and they rose quickly into silent and radiant space over the bright and dazzling autumn coast landscape. It was really wonderfully beautiful, with the spray of gold that the leafy trees made amongst the dark pines and the deep, solemn September blue of the water in the bays—which to the far-penetrating gaze of those above shivered in iridescence of algæ-green, seaweed-brown, and shimmering gneiss-red nearer inshore in the shallower water. In a narrow, smooth belt of calm water a toy steamer drew behind it a silver, shimmering fan of dwarf-like waves. And far away in the east along the strangely banked-up horizon the sea stretched like a low, endless blue ridge.

But most wonderful of all was the silence and the stillness, the incomparable, mighty calm in a balloon that moved with the wind, and in which a candle flame would burn as steadily as in a closed room.

"Strange . . . it is like sitting in a glass cupboard," said Miss Lähnfeldt in a low voice, and there was, after all, in-

voluntary admiration in her voice. But then she added, "Though I must say I thought it would be more exciting. . . ."

Stellan bit his lip; he was not in the mood for enjoying anything beautiful just now. He felt like a stage manager who is responsible for effect before a critical and spoilt public. He thought of Peter, his affairs, marriage—without any enthusiasm for the last. . . . He felt almost hostile to the woman by his side. Her affected indifference irritated him. He could not manage to pay her any sort of attention. He felt like a partner who dances out of time and has nothing to whisper into his partner's ear. Annoyed, he tapped the barometer. It sank, though the balloon was sinking slowly. It was already three o'clock in the afternoon. The sun suddenly disappeared. Behind them in the west the sky was clouded. The air began to grow a cold, whitish grey, and clouded over. They no longer saw the earth below them. In an incredibly short time they had become enveloped in a dense cloud.

Stellan did not descend, as was his duty with an approaching storm when he was so near the sea. He was desperado. Miss Lähnfeldt was going to have an experience, that was all. He threw out several sacks of ballast, which disappeared in long brown streaks in the fog below them.

The manœuvring was not quite planless. He had observed that the wind in the upper strata was several degrees more southerly, and he began to think of the Aland islands.

Now they were suddenly out in the sunshine again, in the cold, dazzling sunlight over an enormous shimmering sea of cloud. They soared alone in a dazzling white, ever-changing chaos of snow mountains and lakes of fog—millions of years before human life existed. . . .

"I have seen this before in Switzerland," said Miss Lähnfeldt, shivering with cold.

The balloon had risen rapidly and lost much gas. It soon began to sink again through the cloud world, which now grew grey. When it cleared up below them they were already out over a nasty, grey, white-crested sea. A very strong wind was blowing.

Then the first feminine exclamation escaped from Miss Lähnfeldt:

"But, good heavens, how shall we get back?"

Stellan bowed for the first time with a polite and amiable smile.

"By steamer," he said. "We will sleep at Mariehamn to-night."

As a matter of fact he was not so sure of it. The wind higher up had evidently been a few degrees more in the west than he had counted on. In its present quarter they would pass south of Åland. But the storm lower down might draw them south . . . otherwise . . . well, what otherwise? Well, otherwise they would go to hell. . . .

What does a man like Captain Stellan Selamb feel when he mutters to himself that he might "go to hell"? Nothing really. He has never properly conceived death. His egoism is so hard and polished that the thought of death slips off everywhere.

If you want an opinion of a man, try to find out his views of death. Death comes *in* life and not *after* life. And it is what happens in life that makes us really alive. What else are we but our conception of, our defiance of, our struggle against, and our victory over, death? Yes, because there is a real, a living courage which conquers death. . . .

Stellan had the gambler's courage. It is always better than cowardice. But it is really very superficial. A hard, frozen surface with a resilience beneath. Clear but shallow thoughts that have never penetrated to the depths of life. An inner reflection of a blind, pitiless fate. . . . How much of the courage that meets us in the wild and bloody history of the world is not of this kind? The great gamblers! Minds and souls are only cards to them, playing cards or trumps in the wild gamble of politics and war. They only know themselves even as trumps in the game. Even their own terrible egoism is really only a mirage. For death has not made them alive. . . .

The balloon drove eastwards with the gale. Stellan sailed low and saved his ballast. In the north they could see Åland and Lärland and Lumparland. The waves washed heavily in the apparent stillness around them. They were sinking lower and lower. The last sack of ballast went over. The balloon began to shrink round the valve. There must be a leakage. Now a giant roaring wave attempted to grab the gondola.

Stellan had to throw out everything loose, the ballast sacks themselves, ropes, fur coats, stethoscopes, and barometer. He used the momentary respite to assist Miss Lähnefeldt up into the rigging, where she sat as on a trapeze

and held on to the cordage. She was very pale and looked as if she might faint any moment, so he thought it best to make her fast.

"This is abominable," she mumbled, as if she had been exposed to some clumsiness on the part of a vulgar partner. But she did not whimper.

They swept in over the breakers and rocks of the wild and deserted skerries of K  kars. The gondola was already trailing in the water, and the balloon began to swing and jerk to and fro. Stellan also climbed up into the rigging. He took the anchor with him. With violent jerks they trailed over a stony, rocky island on the skerries. Then again they were carried over an empty, roaring bay. But now the wind had really turned into the south, and there was some wooded country ahead of them. Stellan cut away the gondola, as it made the balloon dip. Then it rose for the last time. They sat as in a swing over the surging water. Phew! now they were rushing in towards the land. A jetty and a few red painted outhouses were visible in the grey twilight. Stellan dropped anchor in a damp, marshy meadow so that the balloon might trail a little and reduce speed. It caught in an alder with a terrible jerk. Quick as lightning he tore open one of the gores—and the balloon partly fell and was partly flung down into a copse of young birches.

Stellan freed himself at once. He hastened to drag out his fellow-passenger from below the torn, flapping, and billowing balloon cloth. She had fainted. . . .

Some people came running up, and he made them carry her in. They had had the luck to land just beside a country house. Then he rushed to the telephone and arranged for telegrams. . . .

Miss L  hnfeldt lay ill for a few days, till Stellan one day stepped in to her with a bundle of Swedish newspapers full of highly coloured descriptions of the unique and adventurous balloon flight of the well-known tennis player and rider, Miss L  hnfeldt.

For the first time she looked at Stellan with gratitude and approval.

Stellan was invited to the autumn shoot at Trefvinge. He gave a low whistle when he saw the name of Miss L  hnfeldt and not her father on the invitation card. He under-

stood that the invitation was from her and not from her father.

But he also whistled, though in another key, when he heard from the coachman that Captain von Strelert had already arrived. For it was equally evident that Manne, Baron Manne von Strelert, was the guest of the Count.

Count Lähnfeldt had, as a matter of fact, been extremely angry over his daughter's rash action. Busybodies, of course, telephoned at once to Trefvinge to tell him that his daughter had gone up in a balloon with Captain Selamb. In a balloon! It seemed almost indecent to him. He could not remember any really aristocratic ladies who had gone up in a balloon. And with that Captain Selamb into the bargain! From Selambshof . . . brother of Peter Selamb! . . .

When, later in the day, there came a telephone message from Furusund that the balloon had been driven out to sea in the gale, then he regarded the information as a confirmation of his view that Captain Selamb was not the sort of gentleman that the daughter of Count Lähnfeldt should go up in the air with. He was so extremely vexed that he scarcely felt any anxiety for the life of his only child.

Towards evening he calmed down a little when he received a wire that they had landed at a quite respectable Finnish-Swedish country house. And when, the following day, he read in the papers of the brave and sporting action of a lady moving in the highest circles, and of the courage and self-control of Miss Lähnfeldt, daughter of the well-known Count Lähnfeldt of the magnificent seat at Trefvinge, well, then he thought at last that perhaps his daughter's eccentricity had something aristocratic in it after all.

But from that admission to the approval of Captain Selamb as in any sort of capacity suitable company for his daughter was a long step. So far, Stellan had not yet come, in spite of his well-arranged stage management and press advertisement. It was therefore with measured dignity and a rather chilly expression that the Lord of Trefvinge received him. And this occurred in the largest and most splendid room of the castle, the great tapestry hall, which might well have subdued even the boldest.

"Good morning, Captain Selamb! My daughter is just dressing for a ride with Baron von Strelert."

"Yes; I heard that Manne had promised to come for a few days," answered Stellan in a light, almost insolent tone. He read the master of the house quite clearly, so clearly indeed that he sometimes was afraid of not being able to keep a straight face.

Count Lähnfeldt was a very short man, in spite of the high heels and extra soles on his shoes. He had an extremely neat face. His words and his gestures were dignified, slow, and heraldically stiff. But his eyes showed a continual nervousness—the nervousness of the actor. "Do I make an impression—do you believe in me?" they seemed to say.

Alas, nobody believed in him at all. People made most impudent fun of him behind his back. He was generally called Count *Loanfeldt*, and the reason was known to everybody.

The owner of Trefvinge was the son of an unmarried actress, but whilst still very young he married the extremely wealthy widow of a brewer, who died when his only daughter was born. The title of Count was Portuguese. He had received it from King Charles, of the house of Bragança, after having, on a certain delicate occasion, lent him a hundred thousand crowns. This happened in Vienna whilst the monarch was still only Crown Prince. Lähnfeldt, who had quite early begun to imagine that his unknown father was a high-born aristocrat, did everything to correct the unjust fate that had given him a plebeian name, and when travelling he always used to try to come into contact with royalty. And now he had managed to procure rooms at the hotel adjoining the suite of the Crown Prince Charles. It struck him at once that the Crown Prince received a lot of people who did not behave with becoming reverence at all. When he questioned the porter, he shrugged his shoulders. The callers were simply creditors. A gentleman of His Highness's suite had gambled away all the funds, and for some incomprehensible reason no money arrived from home. He could not even pay his hotel bill.

Herman Bogislaus Lähnfeldt needed no more. He decided to intervene at once for the salvation of the monarchic principle. Bowing, he stepped up to the Crown Prince Charles and begged that an old admirer of the house of Bragança might be allowed to hand over to its present august representative a humble gift of a hundred thousand crowns to be used for some charitable purpose.

The Crown Prince received the cheque with an amazed but gracious smile.

About half a year later, Lähnfeldt received two large letters with seals of state and Portuguese stamps. One contained an account of the use to which his money had been put in an Orphanage in Lisbon the other letter contained the letters patent of his title.

He rushed down to Lisbon and threw himself at the feet of the newly crowned King Charles. Then he rushed home again to buy an estate as a background to his new dignity. And now he sat here at Trefvinge, the ancestral home of the Oxenstierna family, and tried to fill out the magnificent frame.

Such was Count Lähnfeldt's history.

He had one great grief. The title was not hereditary. Already in Elvira's childhood he would look at the little plebeian with compassion and melancholy. And when she grew up his only hope lay in a suitable marriage for her.

"You must marry, Elvira," he preached. "If you don't marry you will remain plain 'Miss' all your life."

But it had not pleased Miss Elvira to marry yet. She was already nearing thirty. Some suitors she had turned away herself, others had withdrawn of their own accord, to the great astonishment of all but the initiated.

Neither Stellan nor Manne belonged to the initiated. But both were in such miserable circumstances. And they knew only too well each other's business at Trefvinge. All the same, they kept countenance when they met out in the sunshine on the steps—at least, Stellan did. Manne was not quite so happy. The poor boy had, of course, arrived first at the mill, but it hurt him all the same to stand in the way of an old friend. So he cast timid and remorseful glances at Stellan when he helped Miss Elvira into the saddle.

She, on the other hand, seemed in excellent spirits this morning.

"Come on, Captain Solamb!" she said, with a little side-glance at her father. "Cæsar II. is free. We are riding towards the sand-pit."

Stellan's voice sounded cold:

"Thank you, but I am too much handicapped."

She shrugged her shoulders and gave her black mare a light cut with her whip. But Manne sat still and looked as if he could not get going. Stellan was cruel enough to wave a glove, with a meaning wink, to remind his friend of his faithlessness to "The Glove."

Never before in his life had Manne looked so lost on horseback. He suddenly set his bay to a gallop and followed his companion, who was already disappearing through the park gates.

Stellan had settled on an entirely different plan of action to Manne. He had made up his mind to be indifferent to Miss Lähnfeldt so as to excite her spirit of contradiction, and to try to win the father instead. For that reason he at once began to display immense interest in the history of the castle. Faithfully and indefatigably he accompanied the Count, as he rattled out a whole armoury of dates, and roamed around like a parody of greatness in the many splendid apartments. Patiently he sat for hours in the library amongst peerages, pedigrees, genealogies, and Gotha-almanacs, and listened to the anecdotes of the lord of the castle. Count Lähnfeldt knew *every* anecdote concerning a prince. . . . Then they walked outside and down the steps, and Stellan duly admired the Oxenstierna coat of arms cut in sandstone over the proud Renaissance-doorway. He sat, with a becoming thrill of reverence, on the seat round the giant oak which Axel Oxenstierna had planted with his own hand and in the shadow of which the Count, like the previous owners of the castle, used to sit and marvel at "the small amount of wisdom that the world is ruled with," and grow horrified at the tendency of the time to level us all "like pigs' feet." Stellan was surprised at himself that he need not sit silent at the feast but was also able to say something about Oxenstierna. The moment before he had not suspected his knowledge. It had been the same at school long ago, when lazy Stellan always knew an answer after all. Perhaps it was some kind of thought-reading. . . .

The Count by and by worked himself up into stammering enthusiasm. Oxenstierna! Oxenstierna! It sounded as if he were speaking of his own ancestor. Well, who knows if he had not some such thoughts. Then he took Stellan's arm and drew him to the small chapel, of which he had the patronage, whose whitewashed gable shone under the yellowing birches on the other side of the garden wall. He took the rather large key of the crypt out of a case he always carried in his pocket, and staggered in front of Stellan down into the dusky vault. And over the richly carved oak and copper coffins he mumbled reverently a string of names of

which most were well known in history and stopped at last in front of a gigantic open coffin of porphyry the lid of which was leaning against the wall.

"This," he said, caressing the carvings on the lid, which depicted a bear with a little child on its back, "is the Lähnfeldt coat of arms. And here I shall one day rest my weary bones."

You could hear from his tone that death had lost its bitterness for him since he would enter such distinguished company.

After all this the Count was a little tired, and, excusing himself on the plea of important correspondence, he went up to take his little snooze before dinner, just like any ordinary human being.

Stellan wandered about alone, with his hands behind his back, in the stately park of Trefvinge. Around him this September day he heard from the high tree-tops a sharp sound, as from an over-tense string. In the clear, transparent air a dry leaf floated slowly down to his feet with a fine even motion. It was a motion as symmetrical and regular as the shape of the leaf itself. He pondered for a moment on the static problem. Then it struck him that even in his youth, he had felt irritated that wealth and secure luxury should chase shadows and idle fancies in order to obtain a little excitement. He suddenly shivered with a light but penetrating dread. He realised here, in the silence of the park, in a way that he had never done before, that he, Stellan Selamb, was on the verge of ruin. "If I don't succeed in this," he thought, "there is no other way out than the revolver. . . ."

Stellan stood there with twitching face and a queer, helpless movement of his right hand. What was the matter? Were his nerves already giving way? "Well, of course, one does not lead a life like mine without being punished for it," he muttered. "Strange that it comes like this in the stillness and not in the balloon out there, over the sea, for instance. . . ."

He took a few steps, but halted again suddenly amongst the sunny patches on the hard, dry road. The thought that she, Elvira Lähnfeldt, was now riding by Manne's side irritated him like a noxious poison. He saw her suddenly in the light of anxious and trembling hope. He saw her as she had sat in the sunshine, light, straight, elegant, on her

nervous jet-black horse. Her assurance and her recklessness were thorns in his side. For a moment he found her really beautiful and desirable in her cool refinement. The brittle, overstrung elements in her character seemed to him to be in wonderful harmony with the beautiful autumn day. Fancy if he might lead a calm and exquisite life together with this child of luxury, and taste with her the joys of a satisfied ambition! Even the thought of her secret infirmity seemed to him at this moment an additional refinement, a promise of a painless, concentrated life of pleasure.

Stellan pulled himself up as if at a word of command. "Damn it, I am not falling in love, I hope!" he thought. But the next moment his thought was, "No, dash it all! The fact is I have not slept for several nights!" He struck his leg with his stick. "Keep cool! If you get sentimental, all is lost. She is nothing but a whimsical and obstinate child, and you must conquer her through her whims and her obstinacy."

For a moment Stellan felt his head swim and the ground give way under his feet. This made him doubly reckless. Partly from a kind of cruel sensuousness and partly to give himself courage, he began in imagination to undress her and lay bare her infirmity. "It is not the softest women who are the weakest," he thought. "With all her arrogance and all her sport she is really a poor, delicate, and enfeebled creature. She is suffering from the disease of wealth, the sapping of strength of those who do not need to do anything for their living. And she can't have children. The future is cut out of her body. Whence can she derive any strong instincts difficult to conquer? No, she is really a very easy victim to one who is wise and reckless. . . ."

Stellan already smiled to himself. "No, my dear Manne, you are too good-natured," he thought. "Even from behind one can see when you are lying. . . ."

Then he hurried in to dress for dinner.

The evening of that same day Stellan and Manne were standing out in the moonlight on the narrow balcony that ran outside their two rooms on the first floor. The host and hostess had already withdrawn, and everything was quiet in the big house behind them.

Stellan scrutinised his old friend. Manne's face was pale over his big white shirt front. There was really not much left of the old irrepressible Manne von Strelet.

"The old man isn't exactly exciting," Stellan mumbled, pointing with his thumb towards the house. Manne answered with unusual vehemence.

"Why can't he realise that he is behind the times with his aristocracy? That sort of thing originated in the Middle Ages, damn it all! And how he chews my poor 'Baron.' Heavens above, it makes me wish I were a grocer!"

Stellan was amazed that Manne should get excited so easily. He felt a strange, cold satisfaction, and continued pitilessly:

"My dear Manne, you have not much respect for your prospective father-in-law."

Manne started as if he had been struck. He was unguarded and had no repartee ready. He put his hand on Stellan's arm and murmured almost tenderly:

"Stellan . . . don't let us talk about that any more. . . ."

For a moment they stood silent, looking out into the blue, shimmering night which was full of small, fluttering creatures. Below them the apple trees in the orchard were bowed down with fruit. Farther away a thin veil of mist lay over a meadow in which were some grazing cows whose white spots shone like newly washed clothes in the moonlight. And beyond the bright edging of yellow reeds the bay of Lake Mälär lay dreaming, with a narrow silver streak upon it that leapt into life when a breeze passed. Still farther there were reflections of the moon constantly appearing and disappearing where the water seemed to repose as calm as a mirror, but was all the same stirred by a faint ground swell.

The whole atmosphere seemed full of the delicious coolness of rich, ripe fruits, and full of the peace and calm of possession and ownership.

"Fancy that there are people who lead quiet and happy lives," mumbled Manne.

Stellan imitated his tone.

"Yes, why are we not innocent vegetarians, feeding on carrots and staring at the moon? . . . Nonsense! Manne! Nonsense! There are people who lead dull lives, and people who don't. Let us, as long as possible, belong to the latter! Now is the hour of lovers and gamblers."

He suddenly made a gesture embracing the castle and the acres of Trefvinge.

"Look here, Manne, all this that seems so safe and still—shall we cut through the pack for it to-night?"

When these words escaped Stellan he had still no second thought. It looked as if Manne did not at first understand what he meant. He remained silent for a long time, but then he mumbled too :

"Yes ; let's cut for it."

There was a strange dull note of relief in his voice. It was as if his friend had relieved him of the burden of willing and choosing for himself.

Thoughts flashed quick as lightning through Stellan's brain. It was now that he began to feel a strange assurance that he would somehow win. His words came quick, like rapier thrusts.

"I have an unopened pack of cards with me. We will simply back our luck. He who draws the highest heart stays. The other leaves early to-morrow morning, on the clear understanding that he does not intend to come back."

Manne was paler than ever, and had a vacant look in his eyes.

"Right you are !"

Stellan ran inside to his room and searched for the cards. The lamp was not lit. He had to search for a long time in his suit-case. Meanwhile he was thinking swift as lightning. "Manne must not draw the highest heart," he thought. "No, not this time. For then all is over with me. . . ." The shiver and the dizziness he had felt in the park returned. "No, Manne must not draw the highest card. . . ." At last he found the pack of cards, picked it up with trembling hands, and pressed his thumb nail hard into the edge of the ace of hearts as it peeped out through the round hole in the wrapper. There must be quite a noticeable mark on the other side. . . . Stellan had not premeditated this, had never before done anything of the kind. He felt something approaching surprise.

"Well, that is what we Selambs do," he muttered to himself. Quickly he went back to Manne's room and flung the pack on the table.

"You open the pack and shuffle !"

Manne took up the pack and shuffled slowly, almost indifferently. Stellan sat down opposite him.

"We must avoid any misunderstandings," he said. "The two is lowest and the ace highest, isn't that so ?"

"Good !"

With a gesture indicative of long practice Manne spread the cards out fan-like on the polished surface of the mahogany table.

"You draw first, as I shuffled."

Stellan's eyes locked searchingly at the fan for the marked card. No, he could not see it. He must gain time. He opened his cigarette case.

"Let us smoke a cigarette together, before we draw. It will be the most exquisite cigarette we ever smoked together. A cigarette with Fate. . . ."

"All right!"

The cigarettes were finished. Stellan had to draw. Now he saw the ace on the extreme right. The little mark on the back of the card was noticeable in a tiny reflection from the lamp. Stellan had a feeling of being lifted off the floor, of soaring. But he did not dare to draw the ace at once. That would have looked too strange. He had to minimise the risk.

"Look here, Manne," he said smilingly. "Supposing I draw a low heart straight off and you draw a club. Then it would be sudden death. That would be idiotic extravagance with our precious excitement. We will continue to draw till each of us has at least one heart, and after that the highest wins."

"All right!" said Manne. His tone had become more and more obviously indifferent.

Stellan drew the nine of clubs. He saw Manne's hand hovering over the cards with cold excitement. But it stopped at the harmless end and drew the ace of spades.

Next draw. Not even now could Stellan make up his mind to take the ace of hearts. He drew a card beside it, thinking that Manne, in obedience to some psychological law, would try his luck at the other end. He drew the two of clubs.

Manne drew the knave of hearts. A cry escaped him. It sounded as if he had hurt himself.

Stellan had not drawn a heart yet. Now he had to take it. He felt strangely frightened. It seemed as if he was about to put his hand into somebody else's purse. He felt as if all his fellow-officers were sitting round him staring at his fingers. "No, damn it, what am I really doing?" he thought. Then he pulled himself together. "Bah—you

must throw out ballast — keep afloat. And nobody knows ! ”

He turned up the ace.

Manne leaned back in his chair with a little tired smile—a smile of sad, weary, pathetic relief.

“ Congratulations ! ” he muttered ; “ congratulations ! Fate was right that time, perfectly right. ”

They smoked for a moment in silence. Stellan wanted to say something encouraging but could not get the words over his lips. It was Manne who took up the thread again.

“ I say, Stellan, don't you sometimes shudder at life . . . and yourself ? ”

“ When some excitement is over, I sometimes feel discomfort. . . . ”

Manne's voice sounded childishly pleading :

“ Yes, but, Stellan, have you never experienced moments when you really shudder at yourself . . . at all the miserable and damnable things you have done ? ”

“ No ; I have never permitted myself that luxury. ”

Manne looked at him with a mien in which, for the first time, there was something of a stranger.

“ You are a bit of a barbarian after all, my dear Stellan, ” he mumbled. “ You have a queer insensibility on which to fall back. I am damned if I know how it is, but I have never been able to *will* anything when I have been with you. But I will tell you this much, I should never have entered into this folly if I had not made up my mind beforehand to escape from it all. It's disquieting to play for a living human being. . . . No, away with it all. . . . ”

“ My dear Manne, I can't help it if you only drew a knave of hearts, ” mumbled Stellan coldly.

“ No, old boy, of course you can't, but that's not the point. I have felt the whole time that this was impossible. You don't understand what a human being can feel like, Stellan. I played only because you proposed it. For twenty years I have not done anything else but what you proposed. I am a wretch. And you, Stellan, what are you ? Imagine ! I have known you for so long and yet I don't even know that. It's strange, but to-night . . . I almost seem to catch a glimpse of you, after all. Yes, you are one of those who succeed in everything. You remain a Selamb. And all the same I am somehow sorry for you,

Stellan. Yes, I feel damned sorry for you. Because, you see, there is something in life that you would never understand if you lived to be a hundred. . . ."

Manne had never been known to make so long a speech before. Stellan stood up and patted him on the shoulders.

"My dear Manne, now you are ready for a rest," he said.

"That's right . . . ready for a rest," muttered Manne, and gave Stellan a hand which, at first, was limp, but afterwards pressed hard the hand of his friend.

Thus they separated.

If Manne had realised, about ten years earlier, all he realised that night, his life would, perhaps, have been shaped differently.

Stellan did not go to bed immediately. The genial mists of sleep seemed to have flown into the infinite distance. He stood in the moonlight leaning against the stone parapet of the balcony and felt how its chill mounted from his hands to his chest. His thoughts multiplied mechanically and spread like hoar frost. He thought of his own life. "I have been an incurable gambler," he thought. "Well, what of it—it requires courage after all, that flirtation with Fate. You can say what you like, but I have been a dare-devil. Chance has been my god and I have not betrayed him. . . ."

Cold and penetrating a voice returned the answer he had expected all the time: "Not until to-night. You marked the cards. You were frightened, Stellan Selamb—frightened. . . ."

Stellan was not, for the moment, thinking of Manne, whom he had seduced into gambling, from whom he had won, and whom he now knew to be destitute. No, he only heard the voice that had called him afraid—so cold and selfish can conscience be.

"No, I was not at all frightened," he protested. "The fact is that I, at last, perceived my own stupidity. What the devil is the use of relying on chance! Chance is the fool of necessity, nothing else. And we have been the fools of the fool. If everything is a mathematical certainty, what the deuce does it matter if I dig my nail into an ace of hearts!"

But it is dangerous to betray one's god even if he is a fool. The pitiless voice was not silenced: "You stole your friend's last chance, Stellan Selamb. You are no longer a gambler; you are a thief—a cowardly thief."

Stellan shuddered. That is the worst that can happen to a man of his stamp—to doubt his own courage. He discovers all at once all the things he has neglected to be afraid of.

The stone parapet felt dreadfully cold. It positively made his hands stiff. But he could not let go. The moon seemed to breathe a silent, cold threat. What lies were told about the moon? A dead world! The death's-head from space grinned into his face. Stellan suddenly looked round with an uncertain look. Behind him rose the high white façade like a wall of snow. It struck a chill into his back. And behind it slept the woman without a future—the woman whose bosom was a tomb. Was it not almost suicide to take such a half-dead creature to wife?

"Why do I stand here in the moonlight?" he thought. "Am I alive or am I only a ghost?"

Yes, the moment of agony had come to Stellan Selamb as it comes to everybody. He felt a cruel fear. But it was not the fear that is the beginning of wisdom. He had gracefully skated on the outside edge on the smooth ice of prejudices and fictions. But now he had fallen through into deep reality. "Ugh—this seems to be bottomless! Yes, the world is as deep as my fears."

Stellan came down late the following morning, and found Count Lähnfeldt in an evident bad temper at Captain von Strelet's sudden and unceremonious departure.

But out on the parapet of the steps Elvira sat already impatiently waiting for her ride. She laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

"The baron has already run away," she said. "It was not an orderly retreat, it was precipitate flight."

The morning sun and the ride helped Stellan to recover himself. After the ghostly visions of the night he enjoyed feeling Cæsar's fine shoulders working beneath him. The coolness of the rushing air around his forehead and temples mingled exquisitely with the gentle, innocent warmth of the beautiful gleaming body of the horse. Stellan did not feel exactly tired, only strangely unsubstantial and fragile.

They were riding in silence, and he kept a little behind. He could not understand his feelings yesterday in the park. No, to-day he looked at her more critically than ever. Even during the ride, when she appeared to greater advantage

than otherwise, he found in her something attenuated, tense, unsexed, that left his instincts cold and unmoved. But that did not worry him now. It was rather a relief. It somehow made the thing easier. For one always feels it is easier to reach a goal that one does not long for too intensely. And it was high time. To-morrow the rest of the shooting-party was due to arrive, and then it might be difficult to find an opportunity.

Stellan tried to imagine how his rejected predecessors had behaved under similar circumstances. Of course they had stopped her in a narrow, concealed forest path where the horses had been forced close together and were caressing each other's noses in the twilight of the pines. And then they had avowed their intentions in the traditional style and received a shrug of the shoulders for an answer.

Stellan made up his mind that she should hear something different.

He chose a moment when they were stopped by a floating bridge which was open to let pass a sand barge that was just being slowly towed through. His tone was as cold as possible.

"Miss Lähnfeldt, what would you say to a shoot in Africa?"

She really looked surprised.

"A shoot in Africa?"

"Yes, up the Nile, for instance—to shoot hippopotamus, crocodiles, lions. You get a licence in Cairo and hire a boat—a comfortable houseboat, and a few niggers."

"Well . . . yes . . . perhaps it would be an idea . . . since we can't go to the moon. . . ."

"And how do you think I would be as manager and courier then?"

"Well . . . perhaps . . ."

"Would you like to try it with me?"

"I am afraid it would be a bit difficult to arrange."

"Not if we got married. . . ."

She suddenly looked straight at him, defiantly, nervously. Her voice was hard, almost shrill:

"I am . . . an invalid. . . ."

"And I am ruined. . . ."

A moment before Stellan had never meant to say anything of the kind; he only had a clear feeling that he must be absolutely unsentimental. But he did not regret it. A brutal sincerity may sometimes be the most refined of lies.

The barge had at last passed through and sailed on. Stellan continued in a different and more passionate tone :

"I don't seek any repetition of my life's former adventures. What is most exquisite in you, Elvira, is that you are . . . free. Heaven protect me from those women who only breathe the nursery! No, there is a different and more robust air about you—an air in which one can breathe. I have never dreamt of such courage in a woman as you showed up in the rigging of the balloon. I sincerely believe that we together might do something bold and great with our lives."

"To begin with, we should make father furious," she said in a voice that did not sound at all distressed at the prospect. Then she suddenly turned her horse and started off homewards at a sharp gallop.

Stellan followed, silent and pale, with lips pressed tight together, without knowing what to think. It was exactly the same feeling as he had in the presence of the roulette ball. Through his head a ridiculous thought flashed: "Be bold and take your courage in both hands. I never talked about courage till I began to doubt it. And now, just because I am afraid, I shall fling down my courage as if it were the ace of trumps in the highest suit. It will be a continuation of yesterday's little cheating game."

And he felt how chill self-contempt was beginning to grow up out of the events of the night. . . .

Not until they had arrived at the broad steps did the whirling ball stop. Then the princess of the palace reined in her horse and graciously stretched out her hand with a quick, nervous smile.

"Well, all right, then. . . ."

Stellan did not kiss her riding glove. In front of the groom he bent quickly forward and pressed his lips to her cheek.

She kept her countenance.

"Well, one can still live, even with a little self-contempt," he thought, when of her own accord she put her arm through his on the steps. He was right. Nothing really improves your chances better in the game of life.

Elvira was right in saying her father would be furious. The little man positively swelled with wounded dignity when Stellan came to ask for his daughter's hand. Elvira hastened to point out that she was of age and could do as she liked, but then he threatened to cast her off, to disinherit

her. Yes, he would give all he possessed to the House of Nobles. She tore his heart to pieces when she reminded him in a dry tone that all he possessed came from her mother and that she had her own inheritance from her mother. To be the head of the noble family of Lähnfeldt and to hear such words from a degenerate, plebeian daughter was truly terrible. He summoned to his assistance all the great departed of the castle to fight his fight against his blind and irreverent daughter. He painted in wonderful colours the brilliant and distinguished future she was thoughtlessly flinging away. He threatened to descend on her wedding day into the big porphyry coffin in the crypt below the church.

Goodness only knows if Elvira would have had the strength to struggle on, had not the old man's mad and obstinate resistance suddenly received a blow. A few weeks later a scandal occurred in society that put the Count's superstitious belief in the aristocrat to a severe test.

His own choice, Baron Manne von Strelert, Captain of the Horse Guards, had shot himself after having forged Count Lähnfeldt's signature on a bill for twenty thousand crowns. Then the lord of Trefvinge at last gave in, sighing. Poor Manne had served Stellan even unto death. . . .

Where Manne had hidden those lost twenty thousand crowns was never quite cleared up. But amongst his fellow-officers there was some talk about "the Glove" having taken fine new business premises immediately after his death, and having considerably increased her business.

Stellan was married at the end of November. There was a splendid ceremony in church, with many decorations and uniforms. Peter was promised higher interest on his loans on the condition that he was ill and absent from the celebrations.

The general opinion was that the bridegroom looked a little stiff and aged.

The pair set out immediately for Africa for their shoot.

While the rice pattered against the window of the reserved carriage decorated with flowers, people outside on the platform whispered to each other that there was not much risk in this couple penetrating into Africa, as everybody knew that nothing could happen to the bride.

V

WASTE

THE Selamb stratagem had succeeded with Tord and his wife. A couple of years had passed without anything being heard of them. Stellan could celebrate his wedding without the slightest admixture of Bohemianism. And Tord had not again exercised his temperament in the Press. Everything was quiet, and the pair had evidently settled for good out there by the sea.

But then a communication arrived at Selambshof, signed "Tord of Järnö," in which Peter was enjoined, in angry and haughty tones, immediately to procure more money.

In less than three years the money had wasted away. Let us see how this had happened.

First of all they had, of course, built beyond their means in the wildest manner. When Tord and Dagmar, one still and radiant April day, paid their first visit to Järnö, they, of course, proudly ignored the insipid, idyllic southern glen with its little red tenant's cottage, and rushed up amongst the sparse stunted pines on the hill above. On the highest, most exposed point, where there was a view over both the bay and the sea, they stopped.

"This is where the house shall stand!"

And it must be built of thick, round logs, with a covered verandah, and a dragon's head, and open fireplaces. An eagle's eyrie on the cliff it was to be. Tord made the drawings himself. But not a tree must be felled on Järnö, so all the timber had to be brought in. Labour might probably have been found on the islands round about if they had not been in such a hurry. But they had to get workmen from town. And terribly troublesome and expensive it was to trail the heavy logs from the pier up the steep hill, where there was not even a path.

Anyhow, towards the middle of the summer the grat-

ing of the saws and the blows of the hammers were heard.

Meanwhile Tord and Dagmar lived a glorious tent life on a meadow by the sea. They sailed in their new-built boat, swam, took sunbaths, and ran about naked like savages on the rocks, to the great amusement of the workmen up on top.

One day Tord covered Dagmar all over with fine clay taken from the bottom of the bay, and she stood there in shining blue on the shell-covered sand, like a statue. Mattson the bailiff came walking down between the juniper bushes with an unfinished oar on his shoulders. She, however, stood still and laughed aloud.

"Selamb has made a statue of me! Don't you think I'm a funny statue, Mattson?"

Mattson blinked his eyes and walked on, shaking his grey head at such shamelessness. He wondered in his own mind what sort of gentlefolk had come out to Järnö.

After dinner they went up towards the hill to see if their house was growing. Tord always had a bottle under his arm, and when work was finished the men were treated all round to a drink. Neither he nor Dagmar despised the glass. These little festivities were not exactly ceremonious, for the men soon discovered that they had no need to choose their words. Dagmar laughed and Tord imitated their phrases as soon as the drink began to affect him. It was wonderfully easy to learn their language. I am studying the people, he thought; I look straight through their simple minds. I will make something out of it some day—something uncommonly fresh and piquant. . . .

But then it grew suddenly silent as the weary workmen staggered down to sleep in the bailiff's barn. And with the silence it seemed as if space had suddenly become a deep vortex. And the evening was cruelly cold and green over the serrated edges of the black forests in the west. Then it was a comfort to have spirit in your body. Tord threw back his head, a little too much back, he almost toppled over. I am a poet, he thought. It is I, Tord Selamb, who am pleased to interpret the mysterious meaning of the dull song of the ground swell. The sea, the clouds, the cliffs are mine, and I do with them as I like. Wait till I give myself up to it. Then I shall produce a hymn—something powerful, rude, infernal, something of nature's elemental beauty. . . .

And he felt a supreme contempt for the miserable slaves in town.

Then he went to sleep in Dagmar's arms, which were brown and cool and soft.

Towards autumn the eyrie in the cliffs was ready. It was visible from afar and became at once an excellent and recognised landmark for sailors both out at sea and in the bay. There was a large, high hall and a couple of small rooms with folding beds. Tord furnished them with reindeer skins, elk horns, Laplanders' knives, guns, axes, and ice hooks. And over the door a bear's skull glinted ghostlike in the twilight.

They had made a secret arrangement with the old gardener at Selambshof, the philosopher in the neglected garden, and he used to come out as their only servant. He had been a sailor before he started growing cabbages, and he felt a longing for the sea. His work was to carry water, make log fires, and open tins of preserves.

Meanwhile the Mattsons down in the dell lived their quiet workaday life, tied to the soil, the water, and the seasons of the year. They banked up their potatoes, cut their hay and their rye, milked their two cows, and plied their nets and lines, all with silent, disapproving side-glances at the queer folk on the hill.

As long as there was summer and sunshine and the air vibrated with the hammer blows on his cliff fortress, Tord was contemptuous of the silent disapproval that crawled about on its ridiculous daily round somewhere below his feet. But now it was autumn—silent, still, darkening autumn, far away from the noise and the lights of the town. And Tord began by and by to realise that the Mattsons were in their neighbourhood.

One evening he took a bottle in his pocket and climbed down into the valley. "I will feel that devil's pulse," he thought.

Mattson sat in his workshop carving.

"Well, Mattson, shall we have a drink to clear our heads?"

"Thank you, sir, but I don't care about anything strong in the middle of the week like this."

"All right! I'll drink it myself, then. What are you slaving away at?"

The old man thoughtfully turned a piece of lilac wood in his hand before he began to work with his knife.

"I am making pins for a rake."

"Now, for the winter?"

"Summer will come again. And it's not good for poor people to be idle."

That was one for Tord. He struck at the nettles outside the door with his stick. The calm in Mattson's eyes irritated him. Both sea and sky became commonplace beside that miserable plodding. What was the use of the autumn coming, and the leaves falling, and the darkness and loneliness, when Mattson sat carving rake pins all the same?

"I will pay you back for that, old fellow," thought Tord. And he longed for an autumn storm, a real three-day autumn gale—especially when he had his nets out.

Then came the autumn ploughing. Nobody possessed beasts of burden out here by the sea, but Mattson's neighbours came sailing in with their wives. And then they yoked themselves to the plough. Mattson's wife also took part and pulled, though she was so old, but Mattson drove. Furrow after furrow they ploughed in the drizzling rain with tough, sustained persistence.

Tord ran into the forest to escape seeing it. But he found no peace; he had to go back to the ploughing. For a moment he stood behind a juniper bush and stamped with anger, then he suddenly rushed out into the clay.

"Stop!" he cried. "This is my soil, and I won't look on at this miserable business."

They stopped and stared at him.

"What is one to do, when the island will not feed a beast?" suggested Mattson.

Tord stalked about with heavy lumps of clay under his shoes.

"How much can you get out of these miserable patches?"

"Oh, about three bushels of rye," mumbled the bailiff, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. "The soil is good."

"All right! I'll pay you for three bushels. But get away now!"

And Tord took out some bank-notes.

But Mattson looked at his neighbour and shook his head.

"No, sir, you mustn't make fun of an old man. I have

ploughed this soil for forty years, I have. You ~~in~~ ^{get} your money back again."

Upon which Mattson made a sign to the drawers, who put their backs into the work again and continued their furrow as if nothing had happened.

From that day on Tord hated all that was Mattson's. Incessantly he was running up against the object of his annoyance. Mattson's cock woke him in the mornings with his obstinate moralisings on the dung-heap. When he went down to his boat he swore because he had to dive under the old man's nets, and on the juniper slope he was irritated by the stupid bleating of the sheep. In the midst of his land he was again reminded of Mattson by a lot of troublesome fences, cleverly built up of stones, branches, and thorns. Such things irritate a free man strolling about on his own property. Tord did not step over them, no; he put his foot on the rubbish and enjoyed hearing it crash down, and he stepped through as proudly as if he were stepping over the walls of Jericho. But the next time he came strolling along he found to his fury that the fence had been repaired as by magic.

It was work, patience, foresight, civilisation that Tord hated in Mattson. This hatred occupied him fully the whole of the autumn. If he sat down to write and could not get into the right mood, it was Mattson's fault. If he got drunk it was as a protest against the sobriety of that damned old blockhead. When at last the gale came, Tord had his great day—a real, raging, south-easterly gale, so that the old man could not get out and save his catch, but had to go about waiting anxiously to haul in his torn nets full of seaweed and rubbish.

One day Tord flew into a real rage. One of his dogs, a big, ferocious mastiff, had caught his leg in a fox trap which the bailiff persisted in putting out in spite of Tord's prohibition. There was a terrible scene, and Tord would probably have struck the old man in his own kitchen if Dagmar had not come between them. But from that moment Tord swore inwardly that Mattson should leave Järnö. He only waited for quarter day, which was the first of December, to give him notice.

You can imagine his malicious joy when the whole first week of December had passed without Mattson bringing the rent.

The old man only stared when at last he came with his poor notes and was told that he was to leave at once.

"I have lived here forty years," he mumbled calmly, "and I have always been accustomed to pay some time in December after I have been into town and sold my salted herrings and mutton."

He could not realise anything so catastrophic as that he should leave Järnö.

Tord stood there grey in the face shaking the lease in his hand. "Now I suppose I shall see something else than that damned calm in your eyes," he thought.

"You have not paid in due time, and now you have got to clear out. Järnö is mine, you see, and I don't want you here any longer."

Mattson only shook his head. He went home with a very thoughtful expression, and the same day he hauled up the sail of his big boat to go into town to speak to the storekeeper and to people versed in law, in order to find out the rights of the matter. But his wife came up to Dagmar crying. And Dagmar begged for her and scolded Tord and said that he was disgusting; but it was no use. And then she cried too, because she was afraid of the loneliness when she would be the only woman on the island. But Tord rushed out and stalked about alone the whole of the cold winter day with his lame dog and would not be mollified.

Mattson returned from his journey with a gloomy face, and offered to compromise by a payment of damages. Yes, he would even try to pay a higher rent. But Tord only shouted that he wanted to be left in peace.

The following day Mattson came again, and this time he was humble and alarmed, and begged as if for his life. And now it was a joy for Tord to look into his eyes. Yes, he had a great and lovely revenge on all the prudence and calmness of the world. He escaped with a cruel feeling of pleasure from the idler's secret feeling of inferiority.

"No!" he cut him short. "I won't move. You'll find here, Mattson, no use for your rake pins. Clear out now!"

Shortly before Christmas a couple of sand-barges arrived at the pier, and took on board Mattson's corn, cattle, furniture, and tools. It cut one's heart to see the kitchen table, the folding bed, the plants, moved out into the winter cold.

Tord stood up on his hilltop and watched. He meant to be defiant and hard-hearted and enjoy the ice-cold wind. But, as a matter of fact, he was frightened and felt sick.

Then four steady and determined men from the barges came up and demanded on Mattson's account a round sum for the autumn sowing, manure, newly planted fruit trees, and improvements to piers, fences, outhouses. Tord paid without bargaining and with a certain tremulous eagerness.

Mattson did not show himself except on a receipt.

Then one of the barges set off with the old couple on board. The other remained a little behind. There, hidden among the alders by the shore, stood a powerful youth, and peered up towards the hill. When he saw Tord set out for a walk, he followed him unperceived. He chose a quiet, suitable place where there were no witnesses. There he suddenly sprang out and gave Tord a blow on the back of his head, so that he fell unconscious for a time and awoke covered with blood and with two teeth missing. The barge had already disappeared, swallowed up by the grey, ice-cold winter twilight across the bay.

That was the first time Tord had suffered rough, bodily ill-treatment. It brought out again all the timid hatred of mankind that his marriage had seemed for a moment to thrust aside.

He came home late and said he had fallen and struck against a tree stump. Dagmar could not help laughing for a moment at the ridiculous gap in his teeth. But she stopped short when she saw his expression, and her laugh turned to sobs. She had evil presentiments, Dagmar, and they were to come true. . . .

Tord had not so many opportunities of kicking down Mattson's fences and revelling in his new eagle-like loneliness. It soon appeared that he must go and buy provisions if they were not to starve to death when the ice came, and it was too thick to get through with a boat, and not thick enough to walk on. They had, as a matter of fact, cut away the ground beneath their feet by turning Mattson out. Where were they now to procure milk, fish, meat, and wood? Tord sailed about to the neighbouring islands and told the peasants to bring him these necessities, but they were annoyed at his treatment of Mattson, and therefore could not spare him even a herring.

Tord was to learn to his annoyance that Mattson with his foresight and experience had stood like a rock between him and a thousand worries and difficulties. But this only strengthened him in his angry resolve to help himself. In a furious north wind he and the old gardener sailed twelve miles to the nearest store, and there he bought a boatload of preserved food, ham, potatoes, flour, and lamp oil. They had to hack their way out of the harbour through ice half an inch thick, frozen during the night, so it was high time. . . .

Then came the real winter and locked them in with dark and unsafe ice.

At the end of February the old gardener fell on the very slippery ground when he was carrying water from the well, and broke his leg above the knee. Fortunately the ice bore just then, so they were able to get him into hospital. They could not tempt another servant out to the eagle's nest, so now they had to shift for themselves. Tord was not able to climb the hill with water and wood, so they had to move into Mattson's humble cottage for the winter. In the spring Tord had soundings made, but they found no water up on the hill : so he had to bring out more workmen to construct a proper road up. * All this cost money—so much that even Tord realised he could not go on for ever. Then he bought fishing and shooting implements and a few goats in order to help him out, and he took to cattle-breeding. But now for the first time he really missed Mattson's experience. He did not know where to try for the cod. He did not know how to deal with a tangled net. The ducks flew past when he lay out in the skerries. And the goats soon dried up ; and, besides, they became so wild that he could not catch them. So during the course of the summer these means of support failed him, and he had to turn to expensive preserved food again.

Dagmar had not much time to run about naked in the sunshine this summer. There was not so much left that was "beautiful and wonderful and lovely." But she had not quite lost her gipsy-like boisterousness and freedom from care, though when there was no alcohol left and the bad weather really set in, it might happen that she grew sulky and quarrelsome. Once towards the autumn when she had had special cause for anxiety she mentioned town, but Tord flew into such a rage that she was frightened and flew out

into the kitchen with her cards and her pipe. And Tord strolled about the shores for weeks cogitating in dull anger on the shameless weakness and faithlessness of women.

The whole of this winter Tord went about plaguing himself with his money worries, so that he had no energy left for anything else. The great book that he was to write, his masterpiece, his hymn to nature, weighed him down like a dead weight. It was like loose ballast which only increased the lurch, when he inclined to melancholy. Nature swayed around him like a helpless chaos. He had moments of hatred of the frequent gales that would never yield a song. He grew furious with the eternal, rolling, breaking seas whose rhythm he could not catch.

"Money," he thought, "that cursed money. I am never free!"

Towards the spring he at last wrote the letter to Peter. It had cost him weeks of effort and disgust, such a terror had he of everything in the nature of business. His haughty insolence was only an armour to shield him against his lack of confidence, his fear, and his suspicions.

Peter had not expected such news so soon. He rubbed his hands. And he took good care not to show the letter to his brother and sisters. This time he meant to settle the business alone. Peter delayed his reply for a whole fortnight in order to humble Tord. Then he came sailing out himself to Järnö, not in his own cutter, but in a humble little fisherman's boat. It was in the twilight of an April day. Nobody seemed to have noticed him up in the big grey log-house. The island looked completely deserted. Peter took the opportunity of looking round a little. Neglect and waste struck him like a cold blast. Broken-down fences, unploughed fields, empty cattle-sheds, plundered outhouses with half-open doors hanging on a single hinge. Not a cow or a pig or a hen. He scratched his chin thoughtfully, but his expression was not one of discontent. On the contrary! "I see, that's how things are," he thought. "I shall escape cheaper than I had thought. Why give a lot of money to people who can't look after anything?" And he mentally lowered his bid for the remainder of Tord's shares in Selambshof by several tens of thousand crowns.

That neglect cost Tord Selamb dear.

At last Peter struggled up the hill, panting, and knocked

at the door; he was greeted by an infernal barking from the brutes inside.

Tord had been watching Peter the whole time from the window, but had not cared to go and meet him. Such is the custom of the skerries! And then, he did not want to appear too eager, poor fellow!

The first evening they did not talk business, but they drank the whisky Peter had brought. But they broke up early. Tord wanted to get up early to shoot duck.

So at dawn they lay out at Kallö skerries, which belonged to Järnö. In front of them lay the grey sea with smooth patches to the lee of white, drifting ice-floes, where the little waves lapped the point of land and the silly eider decoys nodded in their wooden way and pretended to be alive. But here Tord's horror of business lifted a little. He felt a grim, fierce kind of excitement. This is the struggle for life in all its hellish nakedness, he thought, not without satisfaction. Here, I lie in the icy cold on a primitive rock in an arctic sea and wait for the opportunity to lure and kill. Under the open sky with a gun in his hand he felt hardened and reckless, capable of any struggle. Yes, he even became intoxicated at the crazy thought that Peter was in some way in his power out here in the wilderness of Järnö. Where it was a matter of deceiving himself he could be a poet right enough, poor Tord!

But Peter lay there in his greasy old fur coat and peeped at Tord with his cunning little bear eyes. He appreciated those little, nervous twitchings which suddenly stiffened into defiance. But how mad is he, thought Peter? How far can I go? He made little frightened delicious guesses, and he felt much easier in the region of his pocket-book.

Then a flight of ducks approached from the south. It looked at first like a dark, billowing ribbon against a low, bright rift in a cloud. Then it quickly became a stormy, vibrating wave. The wind held its breath before this space-devouring speed, which made sea and sky shrink. The living wave swung round in a curve towards the decoys. A confusion of wings beat the air to froth around their heavy bodies. The ducks did not seem to want to descend. Tord had, all the same, time to let go his two barrels into the flight. Peter's gun boomed a little later. His furs were too heavy for him. The old gardener who lay concealed with the

boat was able to bring in three birds. Of course, one can get a shot in when Peter is here, thought Tord, with a certain bitterness. The fact was that he had never had the patience to wait when he was alone. But Peter loudly praised Tord's shot and confessed that he himself had missed.

They shot quite a lot of eiders and also long-tailed ducks later on in the day. Peter was lost in admiration. He warmly praised the fine shooting and the wonders of Järnö generally. He himself was a heavy-witted, clumsy, impossible rustic, whilst Tord appeared to be a master shot and a splendid sportsman. And it ended in Tord, under the influence of several drinks, indulging in the wildest bragging of his fierce, free, eagle's life, betwixt sea and cliff.

Then they returned home.

Dinner was quite festive. Dagmar had, in honour of the occasion, put on some gaudy silk rags and had powdered her nose. It was of no importance that her fingers were sooty. Tord's excited pride derived new strength from the burgundy, the brandy, and the whisky. He clenched his fists and stalked to and fro between his bear skins and elk heads in the high, resounding hall. The firelight from the burning logs flickered over his jersey, Lapp shoes, and untrimmed beard. He showed his contempt, with terrible oaths, of the miserable herds that thronged the streets out there in the town. He was the lonely, free, scornful . . . super-man. He recognised no other relations and friends than the sea, the wind, and infinite space.

Peter also seemed to be very far from claiming the honour of relationship. He shrank up in his seat. He enjoyed doing so before the magnificent Tord. He was not well, he was dusty, worried, tired. Business worried him. There was no difficulty in making oneself small if only one's pocket-book grew fat in the process.

They did not talk of Tord's affairs.

Three days of constant drinking passed. Then Peter suddenly got it into his head that he must go back home at once. He had a great big bill falling due the following day. He groaned over that bill as he was packing up his things. He had still not said a word of Tord's affairs. "You begin, old man," he thought.

Tord stood there with a sick headache and bit his lips. "Cash! Cash! Cash!" throbbed in his head. It was

sickening to talk of money after all his wild, eagle-like boasting. He caught hold of Peter's arm in a way that rather resembled pinching.

"Well, curse you, what about my letter?" he cried. "What will you give for my shares?"

Peter shrank more than ever, smaller and smaller, until he was like a little grey mouse.

"Buy shares? Impossible! These are not the times. . . . I have no ready money."

"Why the devil did you come here, then?" Tord said brutally.

Dagmar went about tidying up with a fur coat on top of her chemise and her hair down.

"What a polite host!" she laughed.

"Yes, I suppose I'd better clear out at once," whined Peter.

For once Tord said something sensible.

"All right. I will come in with you to talk to Stellan and Laura about the shares."

Peter suddenly became very thoughtful. He sat down at a table and began to calculate in a small, greasy notebook.

"I might try to renew that bill, and then I could perhaps help you," he mumbled.

Tord had an instinctive feeling that his last proposal had been the best one, and that he ought to talk to his sisters and brother. But he did not stick to it, so incurably lazy was he.

"Well, what will you give?" he asked in a voice that was thick with excitement.

Peter writhed. He seemed quite in despair.

"I might risk about fifty thousand."

Tord thought it sounded too absurdly little compared with what he had received before.

"Damn you!" he shouted.

Peter began again with an injured expression to pack his bag. And Tord asked Dagmar to bring out his town clothes.

"Sixty-five thousand," Peter suddenly ejaculated.

"A hundred thousand," Tord hissed through the gap in his teeth.

Then Peter felt a wild joy. But it was deep, deep-seated. Not a spark of it came to the surface. He took out his

shapeless pocket-book and slowly counted out seventy-five notes of a thousand crowns each.

"That is all I have with me."

Tord suddenly closed. Such is the power of cash over weak minds. And, of course, he could not know that Peter had exactly the same amount in his other pocket-book.

But he had scarcely signed Peter's paper and parted with his shares when he felt that he had been tricked.

"Clear out now, you cheat!" he shouted. "And don't come near Järnö again, because if you do you will get a shot in your body."

And Peter quickly disappeared with the old gardener, who was to sail him over to the steamer. He calculated that he had earned about two hundred thousand on this stroke of business. But it had been too easy. He felt almost uncomfortable as he sat there huddled up on the lee side and looked out at the calm April day. Yes, there was something uncanny in a Selamb having such wretched ideas of business.

Tord did not go into town to put his seventy-five thousand in the bank. He kept them out at Järnö. No signing of papers, no hanging over a counter. The money must not link him to the town, the community.

Now I am free, thought Tord, absolutely free. . . . He went out to devour the living spring. Alone like a cock he walked about and endeavoured to seek inspiration. Yes, now the moment had come when Tord Selamb would become a poet.

But, alas! no notes would come. He had a big, grey lump in his chest that would not melt. His work, his cursed masterpiece, simply oppressed him like a quintessence, a rude microcosm of his vague conceit. There came cramp, but nothing else. And it was not easy to go about with that ~~cramp~~ cramp in the wild, teeming life of spring. . . .

May is once and for all not a month for the Selamb.

It was already growing summerlike. Tord came to meet it with staring, feverish eyes, and a thin, emaciated face. He began to keep the sea mora and more. It seemed as if the soil burnt his face.

It had been a long, wet, windy day, but towards evening the clouds lifted a little, and it grew calm. Tord rowed out over the great shallow bay covered with reeds and with only

a narrow passage out to the big buoy. From the wet oars and thwarts arose a damp chill. The shores, already beginning to look mysterious in the twilight, echoed back the flapping of the cuckoos' wings. When Tord bent over the side he could imagine the brown, tangled swamp of lake-weed down there in the shallow water. But above him in the cool, endless depth of the sky there glowed a chaos of vanishing cloud, flung out by the storm, but now forgotten and left to the stillness. There were clouds that had stiffened in every gesture of perplexity, of terror, and of suffering, clouds on the whipping-post, clouds on the rack, clouds that had had the "Swedish draught." But all seemed to have died in torture.

Mute, immeasurable disruption.

Tord rested on his oars. He felt it to the very bottom of his being, this disruption. The cramp suddenly relaxed within him. He felt a strange, shivering relief. Then he rowed homewards, but slowly, carefully, as if he were afraid of breaking everything with his oars. Afraid to meet anybody, silently as a thief, he stole into his house, crept up to his bed, and fell asleep voluptuously tired with the sky beneath his eyelids.

At dawn he awoke and at once sat down to write with this mute, wild disruption still within him.

His poetic rapture lasted for several weeks. It was a wonderful joy at last to be able to pour it forth, to reveal himself, to shout out all he felt, to take revenge on all the thousand impressions that had weighed him down to earth with their luxuriant wealth.

When Tord was not writing he wandered about with staring eyes and careful, groping steps, as if he were fragile and afraid to fall to pieces. If Dagmar spoke to him he told her to shut up, though in an anxious, almost gentle voice.

Tord had already filled a tremendous packet of notepaper when his imagination suddenly dried up one long, gloomy, wet day. He sat down to copy it out, but he had some difficulty in finding the way in the maze of his own inspiration. What did they really mean, all those strange figures resembling a barometric curve during a storm or the seismograph record registering an earthquake? Certain after-echoes of his inspiration and an infinite reverence for his own Selambian genius helped him, however, over the

worst. Only here and there a brief humdrum phrase crept in to make it more intelligible, and as a sacrifice to the Philistines.

On an absolutely still, sultry day in July, with distant thunder in the air, Tord copied out with trembling hand the last line of his poem. Then he rushed out into the kitchen and tore Dagmar away from the stove, where she stood in her chemise and an underskirt with her pipe in the corner of her mouth, cooking sausages for supper. He trailed her with him into the bedroom, forced her into a chair, pulled down the blind, and began to read.

It was unrhymed verse, of course, in the shortest possible lines, abrupt sentences, and inarticulate phrases. A collection of exclamations, questions, curses, shouts of jubilation, all expressive of Tord Selamb's relation to woman, the clouds, the sea, the lightning, and the eagles.

Tord read with a hoarse, trembling voice. He seemed to whisper the most extraordinary secrets of his life with a wild emotion. And still, had he not, in the presence of the uninitiated, been seized already at the very first line by a terrible doubt? Was this . . . was this really poetry? He looked at his wife above the sheets of papers with the eyes of a beggar, but of a mad beggar beseeching prostrate adoration.

Dagmar responded rather badly to his expectations. At first she looked a little embarrassed, almost like a child when its parents speak of something it should not understand. Then she looked at the door and mumbled:

"Pray excuse your slave, but I am afraid the sausages will be burnt. . . ."

"Let them burn, then, idiot!" shouted Tord. After which he continued his reading in a more threatening voice.

Dagmar listened again. She sat quite still and good for a long while. Then her mouth began to twitch quite irresistibly, though she looked frightened.

Tord then hissed out the following lines:

"In a blue flash, of lightning
With a blue hissing sound
Creaking
Manly
Zigzag
I saw it suddenly

The filth
 The original filth
 In the recesses of your body . . .
 Damnation
 Unclean and !

"Splendid!" Dagmar snorted. "Thunder and filth!"

Whereupon she burst out laughing, just as when Tord came home with his teeth knocked out, a thoughtless, irrepressible, feminine laugh, cruel without malice, pitiless though with no ill-will. But Tord hated her at this moment—hated her. She laughed! When she ought to have sunk at his feet, and adored his genius, saved him from doubt! Oh! the weaklings' dream of power is often far more intense than that of the strong man. It is not the bad poets who are the least devoted to their verses. Just the line that most challenges the ridicule of the world is often aglow with the most intense passion. Just the very wretchedness of the form often reflects a seriousness from which there has been no deliverance. Yes, the bad poets are the unborn children of emotion. Their sufferings are cruel. People seem to them empty, blind, perverse, malevolent. How can any one laugh at red, flowing blood? How can any one help trembling in the presence of a volcano in eruption?

Tord ran to the door and tore it open. His eyes shrank and his beard shook when he looked at his wife.

"Get out!" he shouted. "Out with you into the kitchen! That's your place!"

And Dagmar went, without any such refinement as injured pride, but with her heart suddenly filled with compassion, a sort of slovenly, annoyed pity.

For several weeks Tord did not open his mouth. He strolled about alone along his shores or locked himself in to file away at his verse. His ambition soon discovered the usual solace for the wounds and doubts of the hermit. I am too singular, too wildly original and deep, he thought. They can't understand me. I must fill out my voids, if I want any followers. I must soften down, moderate, and chasten my verse. So he sat down with intense suffering to convert his poems to a more human note: a process which really consisted in his striking out a few oaths and putting in a few "ands" and "buts" instead of a simple comma.

Then he sent in his revised work to a publisher in Stockholm, this time taking good care not to read anything to Dagmar. He had to wait a long time for a reply. After the first week he already sailed across to the store for his post. Then he went every second day. As it was a long way, he spent most of his time with the tiller in his hand. In the end he did not trouble to sail home, but stayed away in the harbour. And it was as if the store had become his home.

Poor Tord ! So little was his proud self-sufficiency worth.

At last one day the storekeeper flung a parcel to him. It contained Tord's poems. They had been returned. Pale and trembling with fury he staggered down to his boat. He did not sail directly home, but roamed about for several days among the skerries, calling the elements to witness the shocking injustice he had suffered.

But at last he had to return to his home on the cliff, which he saw wherever he sailed. His hatred began to long for her, the woman. He must have somebody to vent his spleen on.

There was something dark, startling, and fierce in his face when he stepped into the hall, without a greeting, and flung himself down on one of the benches in the wall. He could not even wait for an excuse for a quarrel. Dagmar only needed to ask him where he had been so long when he poured a torrent of abuse and accusations over her. She was a stupid, dirty, greedy animal who couldn't help pulling a man down and degrading him. Yes, a short time ago humanity had been a lot of scoundrels who would not recognise his greatness, now he was pulled down and degraded. Suffering knows no logic. He wanted to see her suffer and groan and hate as he himself suffered and groaned and hated. But, alas ! already long ago, during the loneliness of the cold winter's evenings, he had dulled the effect of hard words. Dagmar did not even trouble to get angry.

"Poor boy, so they have been returned," she muttered.

Then he rushed up and struck her with his clenched fist on her soft breast so that she fell to the floor. And with her cry in his ears he rushed out and sat down in a crack in the hillside. He stared into the gloomy darkness that lay so close to his eyes and blended the sea and the sky to a lifeless mass. His hand shuddered after having struck something

too soft. But his outburst had not brought him any relief. It was himself he had struck, himself he had hated, because he was not capable of doing what he wanted to ; because he had not the liberating sense of form ; because he was closed off from the great brotherhood of souls. But it was a selfish self-hatred without any spirit of resignation or reconciliation. There was not a trace of self-conquest. And until he has overcome himself a Selamb does not become a poet.

Now Tord sat mostly indoors absorbed in Zoology. If he sometimes went out shooting or fishing he locked up the oars and the sails of the boats he was not using himself. He was afraid of finding the house empty on his return.

Already in early childhood Tord had turned to animals. There was something of the timid idleness of the savage in him. He was too lazy for most people. Perhaps already then he felt a sentimental attraction to dumb animals, which was natural in one who himself lacked the power of expression. Now he fled to them again—in protest. That was his attitude towards a coarse, degenerate humanity, which did not understand how to appreciate him. No ! crows and common snakes are better ! But Tord's new devotion to animals was without any sentimentality. He enjoyed seeing them pursue and hurt each other. He hunted them and killed them himself without hesitation. And he studied them—scientifically, as he liked to imagine—in thick folios and with knife and microscope.

It was a cool and sweet-smelling evening in spring. Tord stood in a clearing in the open copse and waited for a flight of woodcocks. The leaves were nicely wrinkled like the fingers of a newborn babe and simmered reddish brown in the level sunlight. But Tord bit his lips together and did not suffer as he did before in the spring. His gun was his salvation. Now they were coming, flying low over the tree-tops : “ rrrt ! rrrt ! pisp ! ” It was the mating call, the love flight of the male. Tord threw up his gun and the warm body of a bird fell down among the tree-trunks. He hurried home, eager to examine his bag. The little bird's heart still beat when he plunged the knife into it, its fibres still trembled beneath the glass of the microscope.

It was a knife in the heart of the spring. There was revenge in this Selambian thirst for knowledge.

But soon Tord's interest was caught in a quite special way by a branch of the animal world that he had hitherto overlooked—insects. He became in his own way a passionate entomologist.

To Tord the study of insects was that of a diabolical collection of caricatures. Here life and nature unveiled their whole cruelty and amoral-ity. On most parts of the surface of the earth the spread of humanity has swept away the most gorgeous forms of wildness and cruelty. The larger animals seem, on the whole, rather tame. But the little animals of the soil and the air our civilisation has, for the most part, proudly passed over. Here theft, parasitism, poison-murder, crude cannibalism, and the most terrible perversity still rage without check. Tord learnt to observe and enjoy the jaws of the lion-ant in the treacherous sandpit, the graceful, poisonous thrust of the hymenopter, the erratic frenzy of the golden beetle, the horrible life of the burning beetle amidst putrefaction, the devouring by the female cross spider of the male after impregnation. Yes, this was a lovely Lilliputian world. At first the devilish struggle for existence seemed to him a parody in this miniature scale. But as he penetrated deeper into his mysteries the elements of parody disappeared and only horror was left. The little insect males grew in his eyes to gigantic creatures, still more horrible because of the glistening stiffness of the cutaneous skeleton that made them resemble living machines. They peopled his dreams with horrible sights. They laid their parasitical larvæ in the intestines of his thoughts. They became the pretext and symbol of his new philosophy of life.

In this way Tord Selamb soon fell into black naturalism. He overlooked the fact that if, as he supposed, everything was nature, this must also apply to our human reaction against nature's cruelty. And that therefore Nature contained within herself the correction of this evil. Horror itself is in the last resort a promise. In the creed of pessimism there is a profound contradiction. But these are not Selambian truths.

What lies behind the Selambian egoism is the "blind spot," the blind spot of the soul. It is simply insensitive to rays from certain directions.

During his studies of insect life Tord had a special favourite. That was the praying cricket, Nature's most

exquisite wonder. With her, his brooding spirit celebrated its gloomy mass. One dark, sultry August evening he fell a victim to her charm in old Henri Fabre, the Homer of insects. Round the lamp there was a restless buzzing of daddy-longlegs and grey night-moths that seemed to be made of dust. He watched them, with a mixed feeling of voluptuousness and sickness, blind themselves and burn themselves on the hot lamp funnel. And then he read about the praying cricket, and low with crossed front legs and lifted head it seems to assume a pious attitude of prayer beneath the nun's veil of its folded wings. But as soon as a victim approaches she unveils herself. Then she resembles a vampire, a flying dragon. Then the scissors of her crossed legs open, then she seizes a victim, much bigger than she herself, and devours it as quickly as lightning. Of course, she also seizes the opportunity of devouring the male after mating. But—this is the exquisite point—it has also been noticed how, during the very act of copulation, she turns backwards and begins to devour the male's head. Yes, she positively devours him whilst the hind part of his body continues to fulfil the function of sex, till her greed has reached the most vital organs. . . .

When Tord had come so far, he rose vehemently and rushed in to Dagmar. His face was pale and wet with perspiration and a mingled expression of disgust and triumph. And without any preliminaries he flung the love story of the praying cricket in the face of his wife.

"Do you hear, woman, she eats the male's head? But he goes on all the same, just goes on! Say, then, if love is not stronger than death!"

*Dagmar did not answer. She did not bother to understand what he was saying. She did not care a straw for his praying cricket. But she was frightened at his tone. Yes, from that moment she felt a kind of terror of Tord Selamb and of life out at Järnö.

VI

THE GREAT DINNER

LEANING against the polished black marble counter in a magnificent new bank was standing a thin, slightly grey gentleman with a rigid, haughty face. He was rather pale, and in spite of the summer heat was dressed in a closely buttoned up dark frock-coat. He was Stellan Selamb, ex-Captain of the Göta Guards, now landed proprietor. He had suffered since his long shooting expedition in Africa from the after-effects of a malaria fever which made him easily feel chilly.

Stellan wore mourning crape round his arm. His father-in-law had moved down to the aristocracy in the sepulchral vault at Trefvinge half a year ago, not without having first immortalised his memory by a donation to the House of Nobles, and in this way gaining posthumous admittance.

Stellan had arranged to meet Laura at the bank. He felt quite comfortable in banks nowadays since he no longer had any bills to meet on their due date. He had waited more than a quarter of an hour without showing any special signs of impatience. He enjoyed the quiet hum, the hushed murmur of voices, as in a temple. And indeed the big vaulted hall, supported on its massive, polished, stone pillars, was like a temple above his shining silk hat. Behind the counter the bank clerks solemnly officiated at the high altar of capital, to the accompaniment of rustling bank-notes, ringing coins, and the rattling of the calculating machines that reminded you of eternally revolving prayer-wheels.

It was a temple raised to the real State religion. Above its high copper doors there ought to have stood in thin gold letters the one great word : " Possess ! "

Here in the bank Stellan almost seemed to grow reconciled to the thought of his new brother-in-law. At first he had felt a pronounced discomfort when the news of Laura's

marriage in Petersburg suddenly tumbled down on him at Trefvinge. Her husband, Count Alexis von Borgk, was a Finnish senator of the Bobrikov régime, and was a very well-known instrument of Tsarism in Finland. And Laura had written that they meant to move over to Sweden. Stellan did not need to see his wife screw up her face to feel anxious concerning the reception of the couple in society.

But Count von Borgk was rich, very rich, it was said. And here in the bank Stellan felt, as I said before, a little calmer.

At last Laura appeared through the swing-doors, smiling light-heartedly, just pleasantly plump, perhaps a shade more blonde than before. She was dressed in white, dazzling white, from the silk ribbon in her hat to the tips of her shoes below the rich folds of her skirt.

"Good morning, Laura dear! Congratulations. It was a surprise!"

"For me too," said Laura, and smiled her most innocent smile. "I had positively no idea I was going to get married. But why does Your Highness give audience here and not at Trefvinge?"

"Oh, I wanted to meet you alone the first time."

"I see—and Elvira detests banks, doesn't she? . . ."

Laura looked round and turned up her nose a little. "Well, so here we are back in this gossiping hole. And I who felt so happy in Petersburg! Asia, that's the place for me!"

Stellan blinked his eyes somewhat nervously.

"Why did you not stay in—Asia, then, my dear Laura?"

"I can understand that it would have saved Elvira some worry. But Alexis has altogether withdrawn from politics. And he does not feel at home in either Finland or Russia. He is just selling his estates there. 'I have saved them from one revolution,' he says, 'but I should not succeed in the next.' He longs for the peace of Sweden. It was the last negotiations that unexpectedly detained him. He is coming next week. . . ."

The bank began to fill up with people. Stellan proposed that they should go down into the safe deposit where he had some papers to look through.

It was quiet and cool down in the crypt of the Mammon temple. The electric lights hung more heavily and more motionless there than anywhere else in this catacomb of wealth, where deeds of mortgages, receipts, and share certificates

slept their sleep in hundreds and hundreds of polished steel boxes in the walls, and where there were discreet and comfortable little compartments for the devotions of the worshippers.

Sister and brother sat down in one compartment.

"So this is your refuge nowadays," said Laura. "Well, but what about your Aeronautic Society and your ballooning? I have looked in the papers but have never seen your name."

"No, I have given it up."

"Yes, it is easier to go up with a hundred thousand in debts than with double the amount in income. But you still gamble in this little town, I suppose?"

Stellan shrugged his shoulders.

"I've given that up, too," he muttered.

"But what in God's name do you do, then?"

"I cut off coupons and look after my malaria. But it was not of me we were speaking, but of you. Where do you intend to settle?"

"Well, not in the country, that is certain," exclaimed Laura, and one could see in her face that this point had been the subject of discussions.

"So your husband wants to settle on an estate?"

"Yes; he imagines he does."

"What if you should make a compromise and take Selambshof?"

"Selambshof! That dismal old place! Are you mad?"

"Why not? The big house stands quite unoccupied. Repaired and restored it might make a splendid home. And then it would be useful to keep an eye on Peter. He is getting too awful. There are always stories about him in the papers."

Laura looked at her brother coldly.

"The master of Trefvinge is afraid of the papers. And so he wants to put me in as a lovely guardian for Peter."

Stellan lowered his voice.

"There are other reasons too. Peter is, as a matter of fact, beginning to go downhill. He is yellow and flabby in the face and he doesn't take care of himself. If I am not mistaken something may soon happen. We have great interests to guard."

Laura suddenly became thoughtful. She swung the gold knob of her white sunshade and looked as if she were making calculations. She always did so when she was serious.

Stellan had got his papers, and the steel door of his safe closed with a bang.

"You needn't say anything definite now," he said. "I will arrange a family dinner out there when your husband comes. My man will have to clear up a little, as best he can. And on a fine summer evening Selambshof doesn't look so bad. . . . Well, we shall see."

Laura nodded silently. As a matter of fact, over there in the East she had boasted a little of her social relations. Count von Borgk had perhaps partly married her in order to be introduced to the aristocratic circles of Sweden. And that is why she wanted Selambshof to appear as attractive as possible.

They left the vault.

Up in the bank they met Levy with a black portfolio under his arm and surrounded by a crowd of business friends. He was pale, handsome, and still wore his old, exquisitely ironical expression. He hurried up and bowed to Laura.

"Congratulations, Countess von Borgk! Is it true what people say, that you won your husband at roulette?"

Levy was his old self.

Laura tapped him on the shoulders with her sunshade and laughed unconcernedly. But Stellan looked stiffly after the Jew as he disappeared in eager discussion with his company.

Sister and brother stopped for a moment at the corner before they said good-bye.

"That fellow Levy is making up to Hedvig, I think," Stellan mumbled. "The winding-up of the estate took an enormous time. They say he still appears out there at Lidingön."

There was a malicious flash in Laura's eyes.

"Hedvig? Poor fellow!"

"It would not be exactly pleasant to have Levy in the family, don't you think so?"

Laura stood there in shining white and without a trace of a flush.

"No . . . perhaps not. . . ."

"It would be best to give Hedvig a hint—tactfully—that Levy is—second hand."

"Nonsense! Just frighten her and tell her that Levy wants her money. That will have more effect!"

Then they separated.

"Ugh!" Laura mumbled as she walked about in the sunshine outside the Grand Hotel. "Ugh, how moral Stellan has grown!"

From which you can see that everything is relative in this world.

Peter stalked home from his tailor. It was Stellan who had forced him to order a new suit of evening-clothes for the family dinner.

Peter had at first obstinately refused. It seemed to him a matter of honour not to betray his greasy old evening-coat. Not till Stellan had promised to pay the bill did he give in.

"Tell the tailor you have won the suit as a bet," Stellan hissed out. "It is unnecessary to show people what a mean beggar you are!"

Peter took his revenge by ordering the most expensive things he could get hold of.

He was walking homewards one sultry August night, yellow in the face, bent, and heavy. His head, which had always been a little askew, had sunk between his shoulders. He walked on the edge of the footpath, staring at the paving-stones, and carefully avoided stepping on the joints, so that sometimes he took gigantic steps and sometimes proceeded with a ridiculous strut. It was always so when Peter went pondering over business.

Twice he stole into small bars and had a glass. The farther he came out towards the suburb—his suburb—the more slowly he walked. He stopped at a row of houses that were being built in a blocked-up suburban street that was under repair, and from which you could see the tops of the masts in the Ekbacken shipyard away in the background. These houses lay silent and deserted. Their uneven brick walls glowed in the last rays of the sun high up above the chasm of the street. But in the empty window-holes the heavy twilight floated, and he visualised all the struggles and mean worries that would soon be housed there. Peter stood in the raw, chilly draught from the gaps in the walls and thoughtfully stirred a big trough of mortar with his stick. His expression was at the same time one of disapproval and contentment. "Don't build!" he muttered. "Don't build! Buy from those who have built beyond their means. Houses are worst for those who have them

first. Quite different from girls, ha, ha ! But then they are good, damned good. No shares and such rubbish for me. What is it they say about a thief ? Yes, he is one who has not had time to promote a company, ha, ha ! No, land and bricks are better. Both real bricks and those that have engraved on them ' *robur et securitas*. '

After this monologue Peter stalked on in the twilight. He then came to a rather wild and queer patch of stony ground which most resembled the scene of a devastating battle. It was here that the country and town skirmished with each other on a battlefield that was never cleared, full of blown-up rocks, rubbish heaps, bottomless fragments of road, and fields brown and intersected with a deep trench. The town had pushed forward its apparatus of siege stone cutters' sheds, metal-crushers, and dynamite boxes. The country obstinately defended its retreat by guerilla troops of creeping nettles and dock leaves, whilst one or two dried-up, dusty pines represented the remnants of the main army in retreat.

And over it all whirled the crows, the ravens of the battlefield.

But Peter was the marauder in this war. From each onward push of the town he would creep home with fresh booty of war. He strolled among the rubbish and interposed his coarse signature between those of the buyer and seller. And woe to those who ventured too far in the heat of the moment. They were his victims at once.

Peter struggled panting up a mountain of road metal. He stood up dark against the red evening sky, a grinning and spying evil spirit on a pedestal of millions of broken fragments of stones. He looked out over the masses of houses of the town. They were enveloped in smoke, smouldering like a weary brain after a long working day. The very air around them seemed used up and tired. Yes, there the stupid town lay, and sweated and converted Peter's rocks into gold. It paid dearly for its work. And still there was no gratitude in his glance as he looked down upon it from the macadam mountain, but rather something resembling inveterate distrust and aversion. The town, the community, and the public were there to be cheated, and that was all. This was the doom pronounced on the honest old granite rocks, and it made them less safe, less suited for human habitation.

Then Peter turned on his heel and glanced at his own domains. Then he saw the grey ribbon of a new road stretched past red fences and high piles of wood—long and straight as an arrow it stretched, with neat, well-measured plots of building land on either side. Yes, it was like following the columns of a cash-book with safe entries and solid credits. The whole way to the big sandpit all was well. But there Majängen began, Peter's sore spot. He fell in his own estimation as half involuntarily he stared at that miserable agglomeration of cottages above which even the sunset glow seemed sullied and decayed.

Peter was afraid of Majängen. For several years he had not dared to set foot there. And his fear was shared by all his neighbours and, as a matter of fact, by the whole town. Yes, Majängen was a name of terror. Peter's own policy had long ago driven away all decent, honest people, and now only the worst rabble lived there. In the twilight they swarmed out of their holes, the Majängen roughs, thin, pale, with their hands deep in the pockets of their wide trousers, and caps pulled down over their eyes. They had a new style. Their slang and their types quickly took possession of the comic papers, so that Peter and his like soon began to talk the simple but expressive language of their mortal enemies.

These youths conducted a bitter war against Selambshof. They pulled down fences, broke windows, trampled on garden beds. Their numerous thefts testified to their activity, against which he tried in vain to defend himself with fierce dogs and barbed wire. Safe in their immunity from punishment and intoxicated with their success, the hooligans of Majängen extended their raids to the outskirts of the town, where epidemics of theft and brawling broke out. But it was not enough that hooliganism, prostitution, theft, damage to property, and brawls issued from Majängen as from an open sore; worst of all were the epidemics. Diphtheria, scarlet fever, and typhus succeeded each other out there in the cottages and were a constant menace both to Selambshof and to the town. These were Peter's epidemics. There were no drains, and in his greed he had not given a hand's breadth of land to those who wanted to supply water and light to the community. It was a terrible blunder that was to become both costly and dangerous both

to him and to the town. Now in the dog days there raged again a terrible typhus epidemic which had caused the loss of several human lives in the immediate neighbourhood of Selambshof.

Peter crawled down from the heap of road metal as if the very sight of the seat of plague were dangerous. As usual, he returned by way of Ekbacken.

Slowly he walked past the fine house where old Hermansson had lived, and which was now used as a public-house and for working men's tenements. Down in the shipyard he stopped below an old ghost of a brig that raised its blackened rigging towards the empty space above and whose riven sides disclosed serious rot. Here, as usual, his temper improved. Why did Peter really like to walk about among the tarred shavings or to sit and ponder over the rough, weathered logs on the stack? Why did he continue this business, which, even if it did not quite run at a loss, was still of no importance? Did he perhaps, after all, enjoy the shadow of honest and productive work that lifted its languishing head here on his fine shore property—which increased in value from year to year? Or did he keep the yard going from a pious memory of Herman and his first good stroke of business?

Then he came down to the pier, the long, rotting, shaking pier which still is, if by miracle, held together. Out there on the seat two figures were visible against the dark, smooth water, one bent and huddled up, and the other thin like a boy, with straight back. One was, of course, Lundbom, the old fixture Lundbom, who was still able to keep the books. But the other? It was funny how he reminded you of poor old Herman! But it must be Georg—Laura's Georg! It was not the first time Peter had seen the tall lad wandering about here on the quay, talking to the workmen and old Lundbom. "Let me see," thought Peter. "What if, the fellow is planning some trouble for Laura!" And this thought brought him a certain satisfaction. For his own part he did not feel any remorse or the least unpleasantness at the sight of Georg out here. It simply did not occur to him that he had once wronged his father. He thought rather with a certain phantom-like return of sentimentality of the twenty thousand that Herman had with him when he left. "Well, yes, I saved the slam for him anyhow—I saved the slam."

Of Herman's fate in America he had, during all these years, never heard a sound. He did not even know if he was alive. . . .

At last Peter reached the avenue leading up to Selambshof. He now walked slowly and half reluctantly. The evenings had grown very long in the bailiff's wing. And he did not dare to call in the coachman now when Stellan's cursed butler was there in the main building. . . .

It was very dark under the dense old elms. Just over his head Peter saw a narrow strip of sky and some faint, twinkling stars. Then he heard steps and whispers in the garden. Holding his stick tight and feeling quite revived, he crept behind a scraggy tree trunk.

The old fence creaked, and suddenly several boys came jumping over the ditch just beside Peter. He got hold of the nearest whilst the others disappeared quick as lightning in the dark. Aha! Apple thieves! The boy had his pockets full of unripe fruit.

"Damned rascal!" roared Peter. "You damned rascal! I'll give you something for stealing."

And he struck the writhing figure with his rough stick.

A long, terrible, shrill scream rent the close air. And then Peter suddenly felt the pain of a bite in his arm. He did not let go, but, puffing and blowing, he dragged the boy with him into the office, where he locked the door and lit the lamp.

"Here nobody will hear if you yell," he mumbled.

But when Peter came up to the boy again with the stick, he was startled at something in his pale, dirty face distorted with crying.

"Where do you come from?" he mumbled.

"Majängen."

"Who are your parents?"

"Mother washes . . ."

"What's her name?"

"Frida Öberg!"

Then the boy suddenly stopped sobbing and stared Peter boldly in the face with an impudent, horribly precocious look that seemed to indicate that he knew all.

Peter had a sensation of horrid nakedness, of bare, shivering flesh. It was as when in a nightmare you suddenly find you have forgotten your trousers. But at the same

time he was afraid to betray himself by a hint of weakness. So he seized the boy firmly by the ear and led him to the door.

"Don't ever steal apples again," he muttered. "It's ugly to steal. I won't thrash you any more this time."

Quick as a flash the boy disappeared from his grip and was swallowed up in the shadows of the trees. But from the thick, silent darkness Peter at once heard a shrill, sharp voice, mad with fury, but at the same time pitiful and terrible:

"You damned carcass! I'll pay you out for that, you damned old carcass!"

Peter closed the shutters. He had long ago had shutters put up. Then he sat down under the lamp and examined the lute in his arm. And he was frightened—frightened as a mouse—of infection from Majängen.

Then the day of the great family dinner arrived.

Between resplendent footmen the carriages and the motor-cars drove up over the newly weeded and freshly raked, sand-covered ground in front of the house. For many reasons they had avoided the daylight and chosen the twilight, which concealed the worst neglect.

Peter had received strict orders to behave decently. He stood in the hall underneath an improvised decoration of antelopes' heads and negro weapons—trophies from Stellan's African shooting trip—and received the guests. In his new evening-dress he felt like a foot that has gone to sleep in a tight boot. He had pins and needles in his whole body. The thought that he would eat and drink as much as he liked quite free of charge could not overcome his fear of Count von Borgk, whom, after all these magnificent preparations, he imagined to be some sort of wonderful superman so covered with orders that any other poor devil would feel quite naked in the region of the left lapel. But Peter calmed down when the newly married couple arrived at last, and the Count proved to be a gentleman whom Laura could have hidden away in her *décolletage*. Yes, he was a little dark gentleman with soft eyes that avoided looking into other people's eyes, and with an expression round the mouth that was both suffering and sensual. He had thin, hairy hands which seemed to melt away when you shook hands. He spoke a low, sing-song Finnish-Swedish, with a certain admix-

ture of Slavonic softness and suppleness. And his dress-coat was bare, quite bare, over his heart.

It was strange to think that this was the hated and feared Count Alexis von Borgk, accused by exiled Finns of a perverse betrayal of his country and of coarse, political sadism. Was he one of those neurasthenics of authority who are only able to breathe amid the cold, momentous gusts of world politics? Was he one of those strange heraldic beings who are irresistibly attracted by the austere magnificence of a throne—who are linked to the forces of reaction by emblems and ceremonies? Or was he perhaps a weak dreamer who had fallen a victim to the mystery of panslavism, and who had nothing but grey spleen left for anything so mean as a Grand Duchy with a few million souls? Anyhow, he was now a man who could no longer retain the post he had chosen, but had retired, having all the same suffered and sacrificed something. A son by a previous marriage with a Russian had fallen in the Russian-Japanese War just after he had been commissioned lieutenant.

But Laura was not in the least affected by this. She took her husband playfully. The Countess had really escaped from the skirmishes of life with surprising ease. Her smile had kept its impertinent freshness. She still continued to look as if she had just got out of bed and had a little of the warmth of the bed left. And her skin was, in some strange way, more naked than that of other ladies. This evening a lot of jewellery with some cold green stones shimmered on it, but no pearls. Pearls did not suit her, she thought. Did she perhaps realise that their soft roundness and mellow sheen are symbols of quite a different sort of womanliness?

Among those who did not know her, Laura always created a sensation by having Georg with her. They had not seen him for years and had almost forgotten his existence. And now he suddenly appeared on the scene, a tall, well-grown lad of sixteen, dressed up in his first dress-shirt and dress-coat, and still quite shy and confused by this unexpected promotion after years of oblivion and neglect. He was really very like his father, Georg—so like that one was almost startled. There was something open, honest, straight-backed, that the Selambs regarded as stupidity, but with a new admixture of grit and determination that made all except Laura think. She seemed to be merely content with her new

possession. Imagine that that overgrown schoolboy in his ridiculous knickers and worn sailor's blouse should turn out so presentable! Yes, these last days Georg had been paraded, introduced, boasted of, and spoilt. She went with him everywhere, just as in the recklessness of love you would show off a new lover. Perhaps it may, as a matter of fact, have been a whimsical motherly falling in love. Perhaps something reserved, even hostile, in her son had awakened her feminine desire for conquest. Or was it only secret anxiety born of the glance of shy, uncomprehending fear that Georg first cast upon his new stepfather.

They went in to dinner.

Stellan and his butler had really worked marvels. The shabby old dining-room at Selambshof was impossible to recognise, thanks to a soft, wine-red carpet, expensive sconces, handsome high-backed chairs, exquisite table silver, and plenty of white orchids.

But it looked all the same as if it was going to be a silent dinner. They were mute after the first nervous talk. They stared at the batteries of untouched glasses in front of each chair as if they signified a troublesome journey with many hardships. Mrs. Elvira sat, cool and thin, in her armour of jet and black silk, and breathed reserve from every fibre of her body. And Hedvig Hill seemed a monument of silence. Words seemed to shrink and freeze away in her neighbourhood. Everybody seemed to be afraid of the wine going down the wrong throat after Peter's awkward speech of welcome during the soup. All except Laura. She continued, apparently unconcerned and gay, her little flirtation with Georg.

"Your health, Georg dear!"

Georg drank to her attentively and obediently, carefully sipping his glass.

"Put a white orchid in your buttonhole."

Georg obeyed again. Laura threw a kiss to him. "Just look how sweet the boy looks!"

Georg grew purple in the face and looked at his plate. Laura clapped her hands.

"And he blushes like a little girl!"

Count Alexis followed this flirtation with languid eyes and a little tired smile.

"Well, that is something our good Georg has not inherited from you."

Evidently the Count had no illusions.

Then there was a new silence, only interrupted by the almost inimical ringing of glasses and knives. But Laura did not give in. She looked about her with bright, defiant eyes. Then she suddenly turned to Hedvig and began to talk of Levy. It was really deliciously impudent of her to start just that topic. 'Laura teased Hedvig a little about her lawyer, warned her in playful phrases against his business genius, and then said a few malevolent little truths about Jews in general.

"You see Alexis is an anti-Semite and I've caught it from him," she ended up, with a soft smile.

Hedvig answered nothing. She only turned white in the face. Even her perfect bare shoulders grew whiter and seemed to radiate a chill through the dark velvet of her dress. But her black eyes stared with a shy, irresolute hatred into her sister's restless eyes.

Stellan was afraid lest Hedvig should suddenly tell Laura some awful truth; he was so afraid that his glass jingled against the plate as he raised it. But Laura had already noticed a haughty expression of disgust on Elvira's face, and turned at once to her sister-in-law. She began innocently far, far away in Africa, on the Nile, during Stellan's and Elvira's famous wedding trip. From there she went over to the little panther cubs that they had brought home, and which she had seen during her call at Trefvinge. Yes, they were too sweet, those little panther cubs, though she, for her own part, would never have dared to take them in her arms and play with them now that they had grown so big. But Elvira had been like a mother to them from the beginning. It was really delightful to see her with her little twins, so one could imagine worse results from a wedding trip. . . .

That was one for Elvira. If Laura had torn off her clothes and pointed at the scars after the operation knife, it could not have been more obvious. But the lady of Trefvinge Castle did not move a muscle. She only muttered quite low—so low that only those nearest to her could hear:

"My dear Laura, now you have stayed long enough in Africa. It would, perhaps, be good for you to think of a cooler place—say Siberia, for instance."

Laura did not trouble to catch the whisper. After her

last bravado she settled down and seemed determined to be bored too.

Count Alexis seemed absent-minded during the last part of the conversation. Now his soft and musical voice was heard :

"I wonder if I might have some water. . . . No, thank you, not soda—ordinary water. . . ."

"Ordinary water?" grunted Peter, suddenly quite amazed.

"Yes, thank you, if you have spring water."

"Yes, certainly, ha, ha! There is certainly spring water!"

Stellan sent one of the servants for a jug of fresh water straight from the well.

The Count filled a champagne glass, sipped it a little, and leant slightly back with half-closed eyes.

"Water is so pleasant," he mumbled. "It tastes of nothing, absolutely nothing. . . . And everything is so calm in Sweden. You shoot so surprisingly seldom indoors or in the streets. It is like a sanatorium. And all the ladies look like nurses, charming nurses—except Laura, of course. . . ."

Then Count Alexis' glance fell upon old Enoch, who hung over the green sofa opposite him. He started as if a real live person had suddenly stood up, as if there were a hitherto unnoticed guest in the room.

"Who does this excellent portrait represent?"

"It is our grandfather," Stellan hastened to answer. "Enoch Selamb, a landed proprietor. He was a clever agriculturist in his day."

The time was past when Stellan indulged in any playful truths about his ancestors.

Peter had already, in secret, found time to drink a good deal, and looked somewhat bloated.

"He was a damned rascal," he cut in contentedly; "a real old rascal. You couldn't cheat him. . . ."

He stopped when Stellan trampled on his feet, and turned back to his bird and his wine. But Laura skittishly made the sign of the cross before her ancestor.

"Old Enoch is our patron saint," she explained to her husband. "He ought always to have a candle burning before his picture—as before an ikon. Thanks to him, no Selamb can do really bad business."

The Count's glance travelled searchingly round the table and then back to the portrait.

"H'm," he mumbled, "one can see the likeness."

There was a pause again, and everybody felt old Enoch's looks directed towards him, even those who had their backs turned to the portrait.

Peter ate and drank for the whole company. The dress-coat did not pinch him any more. By Jove, he began to feel at home amongst the guinea-hens and the golden pheasants. Yes; this was not a bad show. "May I be damned if I have ever sat down with so much money before," he thought. "Here is Hedvig the Tragedy, who is worth at least three millions; she is lost in her pile of notes as big as herself. And there are Stellan and Elvira, who are also expensive creatures, even more expensive than Hedvig—at least five millions if we count Trefvinge as worth three. And Laura, the little minx, weighs as much, if it is true that the Count has sold three big estates in Finland and Esthonia." And then there was himself, Peter the Boss . . . with Ekbacken and Kolsnäs and a big slice of Selambshof and all his building-land and houses. He was the worst of them all, not less than eight millions. And that was calculating absurdly low, almost as if for income-tax returns. He scarcely dared to confess to himself how much he owned. And if he added it all together it came to more than twenty millions. Or, perhaps more correctly, thirty. Thirty millions! Peter rolled the figure in his mouth, chewed it with the fowl, swallowed it with the wine. Thirty millions, thirty millions. . . .

He was not at all like King Midas. The gold agreed with him splendidly.

But just opposite sat Stellan, thin, straight, scrupulously elegant, with the set face of the retired gambler. He sat looking at the row of untouched glasses in front of his wife. All those fine vintages! An exquisite harmony in colour from the golden-green mist over the light, sparkling sunshine of the champagne and the glowing Burgundy down to the heavy brown dash of colour in the Malvoisir! And all of it untouched, disdained. Oh, what sort of a creature had he bound himself to—thin, cold, fastidious, sterile, incapable of life! Not even Africa had for a moment raised her temperature above zero. Even her capricious love of sport had suddenly been blown away when she noticed that he had expected something of it. She seemed nowadays to be

exclusively occupied in being bored. It seemed as if the staff of servants at the Castle had gradually assumed all her functions of life. Stellan sometimes felt a sort of fear of her, as of a lingering disease, a dangerous languor. Yes, the disease of wealth is infectious. He was already infected. And still he could think of nothing but collecting more money, and more money. He was afraid when he thought of anything else than money.

Stellan started. By Jove! they had already reached the dessert. He absolutely must stand up and make a speech. But how difficult it was to get out of the chair to-day! "Supposing I refuse to tell a lot of lies about Laura and the damned Russian," he thought suddenly. "Supposing, instead, I rise and propose a toast to—absent friends! To poor Manne von Strelert who happened to shoot a hole through his head. And to that decent fellow, Herman Hermanisson, who took a little trip to America. And to Percy Hill, who died in beauty. And to von Borgk's boarders in the Peter-Paul fort, and in Siberia. And to all the people we have kicked over and climbed up on. Supposing I raise up Banquo's ghost! That would be exciting!"

Compassion was not one of Stellan's frailties. He regretted nothing, felt no remorse. He only felt stiff, isolated, frozen, paralysed by melancholy irony. And when he looked round the silent circles the others seemed to him frozen also. It seemed as if they were all sitting frozen in a gigantic block of ice, and only imagined that they could reach each other with their thoughts, words, and gestures. That they breathed and moved was probably only imagination. Really they were all dead, except Peter. Nothing affected him. He belonged to those organisms low down in the scale that can stand any amount of cold. . . .

Yes, it was a ghost-dinner. The great ghost dinner at Selambshof. And from the wall old Enoch's eyes stared, stared, and stung. "That's right, my children," they seemed to say, "now you are ready. Now I've got you. Now you are inside my magic circle. And none of you will escape, none. . . ."

Stellan felt an emptiness in his head, paralysed, sick. His glance wandered from one face to the other in the circle. He scorned them, he saw through them, but still he begged them for help. If only I could get up out of this cursed chair. If only I could get up out of this cursed chair!

Then his wandering glance suddenly fell on Georg. Georg sat in his corner and looked lost and unhappy. An honest young face. "Bah, you know nothing yet," Stellan thought, shrugging his shoulders. "What is straight will be crooked, my young friend, and what is warm will grow cold." And he felt his lips move in a pitying smile. But still he could not look away from the boy's face. It was as if he had suspected that here was something like a crack in the wall of ice, a break in the magic circle. Yes, deep down he felt a strange relief to see him, to notice his timid protest against his stepfather, his anxious wonder at his mother, and all reflected in a face that knew nothing of dissimulation.

At last Stellan got up and made his well-balanced speech to the newly married couple with a certain military briskness in his delivery.

After all, even lies have nothing but truth to live on. And even the coldest egoism must in the end draw breath beside whatever honour and goodness is left in the world. Otherwise it would die of suffocation. . . .

Two days after the dinner at Selambshof, Count von Borgk got typhus and was taken to a nursing-home. At the same time not less than three of the servants on the estate fell ill, amongst them Peter's housekeeper.

Peter was in deadly fear, and could think of no other way out than to sail away immediately from all this misery. He was already on his way down to his boat—Herman's old *Laura*—which still lay at her buoy in the bay where the bathing-box was. But when he passed the well on the slope below the terrace, he saw that the cotter pin was not in its place in the little trap-door at the foot of the pump. Peter lifted the lid of the well and peeped down. It was a shallow well, and was now almost dried up from the long drought of the Dog Days. He saw at once that the bottom was covered with newspapers, dirty rags, and unspeakable filth.

Peter got up dizzy and sick. "Majängen!" he thought. "The apple thief! Frida Öberg's boy. That was what the Count got for drinking water! That's what he got for his sanatorium!"

With a groan and a push of his massive body, Peter seized the pump and pump-house in a mighty grip and threw it down so that all might see that the well was poisoned.

Then he fled head over heels down the hill to his boat and out towards the bays of Lake Mälare.

Count von Borgk's condition did not at first cause much anxiety. His temperature was comparatively low and his strength seemed to hold out.

Laura felt normal again by and by after her own terror of infection had passed. She telephoned each day to the nursing-home and sent flowers and little notes.

But as the time passed she found it more and more difficult to find anything to write. She began to feel out of sorts, listless, bitter. She had looked forward to some pleasant weeks at the seaside, and now she had to sit here and be baked at the Grand Hotel in the midst of the summer heat and the dead season.

That Count Alexis should immediately fall ill was not a part of the marriage contract.

Laura consoled herself as far as possible with Georg. During her long stay abroad he had been boarded out in the family of a bank cashier. There he had a tiny room about as big as a wardrobe, which just held his bed and school-books. The cashier and his wife were cold, silent, nervous people who made a face if you talked aloud or banged the door, but who otherwise left Georg completely alone. Nobody during the last two years had asked how he was doing at school. But this very forlornness had awakened in him a defiant ambition that had kept him up to the mark.

Now he moved to his mother at the hotel, and they had their meals in the big dining-room. It was an immense change. Laura had to force him to help himself to the fine food. He writhed on his chair, and it looked as if he were eating with a bad conscience.

Laura stayed in bed late in the mornings. Usually she heard no sound from Georg until he came home breathless for lunch. He had been out for a walk, he said. Laura became curious. One morning she awoke early, at eight o'clock, and stole into Georg's room. It was empty. And he did not return before twelve. When his mother pressed him with questions, he suddenly looked her straight in the eyes and answered vehemently that he had been at Ekbacken.

Laura smiled a tart little smile and pulled together her kimono, which had opened and showed her silk stockings.

"Oh, are you so mad on boats?" she said.

The following day, whilst Laura still lay in bed, the telephone on her night-table rang. It was from the nursing-home. The nurse who spoke sounded very serious. The Count was worse, and incessantly expressed his wish that the Countess should come to see him.

Laura felt a violent discomfort. She grew cold all over. The thought of the nursing-home made her sick. She had not yet been there. She was afraid, mortally afraid, of long corridors, temperature curves, the smell of disinfectants, groans, biers. Every fibre of her body shrank back from the serious danger of infection and the nearness of death. But all of a sudden she felt relief, a wonderful relief. Georg! Yes, Georg would probably go! With trembling fingers she seized the receiver again.

"Oh, nurse, I should like to come, but I can't—not to-day. I am ill in bed myself. I feel most awfully dizzy. But I will send my son."

After which Laura tied a damp towel round her head and waited for Georg.

When he came in she lay writhing on her pillows and really looked rather ill. She caught hold of his hand and pressed it violently.

"Georg, dear, they have rung up from the nursing-home. He wants to see me. But I can't trail myself there. I feel so awfully bad. Will you go there and give him my love—tell him how ill I am?"

Georg stood pale, hating the thought of going to the sick-bed of this feared and secretly detested stranger. But he drew himself up. It did not enter his head to say "No" on an occasion like this.

After some hours Georg came back. He had not been able to give any message, as the patient was unconscious.

Laura put no questions about the nursing-home, what the doctor had said, or how the patient looked. She only heaped her gratitude on Georg and fawned on him like a dog.

She probably felt she might need him again.

The next day the Count was still unconscious, and then Laura ventured to be a little bit better and to get up. It was boring to stay in bed, and, besides, she had a superstitious fear of pretending to be ill—she might really become ill.

On the whole, she thought extraordinarily little of the

man whose name she bore. It seemed as if his illness had obliterated all her memories, from the earliest society ones to the latest exquisitely sensual; it seemed as if it had made of him a remote, half-hostile stranger.

Several days passed. There was no talk of any visit to the invalid. He could speak to nobody; periods of unconsciousness interchanged with periods of delirium. Laura could no longer keep quiet or sit alone. She had at last made some acquaintances in the hotel—a secretary of the Danish Legation and a young widow whom she had met at the seaside. They in their turn had introduced her to a Russian musician who was passing through. So they were able to have a little game of bridge up in Laura's sitting-room in the evening.

"How is your husband getting on?" said the lady between the bids.

"Oh, I was there to-day . . . he is much better. . . ."

Georg heard these words through the half-open door.

Then the telephone in Laura's bedroom rang. With a sigh she dropped her cards and went in, carefully closing the door to the sitting-room. The Russian did not play bridge, but was improvising on the piano.

Once more there was a terrible, pious, insistent voice on the telephone.

"The Count is conscious again. He only mumbles your name. He must speak to you. He can't have long to live. You won't let him die quite alone. . . ."

Laura's voice sounded like a cry of distress, half in despair, half in fury:

"Good God! . . . I . . . I told you, nurse, that I was ill myself . . . that I am in bed . . . that the doctor has forbidden me. . . . But I will try to send somebody. . . ."

She rushed in to Georg. She was pale, very much décolletée, dressed in black rustling silk and covered with jewels. She did not notice how her son quickly hid a parcel under the table. She stroked him on his arm and hand quickly and nervously.

"Dear little Georg, you must go to the nursing-home again! Alexis has become worse. I can't bear to see him suffer. My nerves are quite exhausted. Yes, it would quite finish me. I have some friends here, but they must leave, they must leave at once. . . . I am simply done. . . ."

Georg turned away. Her perfume enveloped him. As she bent forward he saw with a shudder her dazzling white breasts move below her low-cut frock. He suddenly felt a strange, sickening shame that she should be his mother, that he had sprung from her body. He jumped out of his chair.

"No, mamma, you go yourself!" he exclaimed.

But she clung to him, moaned, begged, caressed, kissed him. Yes, in her miserable panic she seemed to have forgotten that he was her son, and she was prepared to employ all the artifices that a frightened woman can employ in order to move a man.

Georg jumped up and pushed her away from him.

"Leave me alone!" he said. "I don't want you to touch me!"

Merely from anxiety, and in order to get away from her, he at last rushed out for the second time to the sick man.

Laura stood at the table with a rigid smile on her lips. The danger she had escaped seemed to have numbed every limb in her body. She pulled her shawl over her bare shoulders. Her son's contempt passed like a chill shiver over her skin. Your own flesh and blood! Bah! The boy was like wax in her hands.

She went into the sitting-room. She walked slowly and carefully. It seemed as if there were something cold, frail, and motionless within her, something that could not bear a shock.

Laura excused herself to her guests.

"My husband is worse and I must go to him," she said quietly and solemnly.

Appearances must, of course, be saved.

They said good-bye with many regrets and expressions of sympathy. The young Russian musician had a refined and very sensitive face. He meant to kiss his hostess's hand, but stopped half-way and turned a little pale. As he bent over this beautiful and robust woman's body it seemed as if he had suddenly been startled as before something dead, before the stench of a dead soul.

Laura hurried to bed, took a sleeping-draught, and pulled the bedcover over her head.

Early the next morning she was awakened by the message

of the death of her husband. She first felt a strange, creepy sensation of relief. Now he would never call for her again. Now she no longer need go and see him. Now she could escape the nursing-home. . . .

But then she was seized by a bitter ague. Her nerves, at least, had not forgotten him. A cold breath chilled certain of her more intimate memories and the cold, bony fingers of death groped too close to her own spine. It was like a poisoning of the senses.

Laura felt so out of sorts and so sick that she quite believed she was mourning her dead husband, and felt keenly sorry for herself. She dressed in her plainest black frock and sank down into an easy-chair.

Then a tall, thin man in a black frock-coat carefully buttoned, and dismal folds on his forehead, appeared ghost-like on the scene. He was the undertaker. Laura told him with a tired, an infinitely tired gesture, and in a few monosyllables, to address himself to her brothers at Selambshof and Trefvinge. After which the gloomy-looking figure withdrew, bowing solemnly.

Laura sank together. "I am an old woman," she thought. "Everything inside me feels so frozen and dead. I am an old, broken, lonely woman. My life is finished."

Then she suddenly thought of Georg. Good God, Georg! She had forgotten Georg. Of course, she had Georg. She was not alone. Her life was not finished. She had her son, a big, handsome, clever, brave boy.

A glow of warmth surged once more through Laura's veins. A certain remorse for her previous indifference and neglect stirred inside her. For once she really suspected something of a mother's feelings.

She flew into Georg's room.

It was empty.

She sat down to wait. She sat on the edge of his bed, fingering his pillow and his night-shirt, and got out her watch every second minute. Never before in her life had she really waited for any human being.

She called the chambermaid. She inquired of the waiter and the hall porter. No, nobody had seen the young gentleman. And still he had been sleeping in his bed, you could see that.

Laura worked herself up into a state of nervous, shivering,

whining anxiety. Towards dinner-time the hall porter sent up a letter that had been left by a messenger boy. It was from Georg, and read as follows :

“ TO MY MOTHER,—

“ I am writing to say good-bye. We shall not see each other again. I had not meant to leave like this, but what happened yesterday was too cowardly. I can't stay any longer. I am going to sign on as soon as I get a chance and sail to America to find father. It is no good trying to find me, because I am sixteen years of age, and I am not coming back to you. I know all about how you and Uncle Peter behaved to father. I know it through old Lundbom and Sara, who was a maid at Ekbacken. She is married to a workman in the yard now. Old Lundbom believed in you at first, but he was sorry when he understood how everything had happened. Two years ago he received a letter from father that was to be given to me when I was sixteen. In it is his address and everything. He is in a big office and has a rather good job, though it was not so easy at first. He is a noble man, I know that. It is for his sake I have been working so hard at school, because you have never cared for me before. So now I am going. All the money I have got from you is in the right-hand drawer of the table, because I don't want to use it to run away with. Good-bye now. And you must forgive me, for I cannot do anything else.

“ Good-bye !

“ GEORG HERMANSSON.

“ P.S.—If anybody does any harm to old Lundbom because of this, they will hear from me when I come back ! ”

Laura did not faint after reading this letter. She had no attack of nerves, made no scene, did not stir up heaven and earth to get her son back. She only suddenly felt empty, quite empty. She no longer felt anxious for Georg. She could not, as a matter of fact, understand her former anxiety and eagerness for him.

She washed her face in cold water, powdered it, and drove out to order mourning clothes.

VII

SHADOW PLAY

THE spring was early that year. Through the windows of the Renaissance hall of the Hill villa the May sunshine flowed calm and warm as in June. But Hedvig, who was walking to and fro, had still retained her winter complexion. Yes, the tragic beauty of her face was deathly pale as she took a few steps to and fro like a prisoner measuring his cell. She seemed slimmer than ever, and was still dressed in black. Like a dark shadow she glided to and fro, to and fro, across the wine-red, sun-bespattered carpet.

Each time Hedvig came opposite to the little cupboard on the wall where the telephone was concealed she stopped a moment with helplessly hanging hands and a restless, anxious expression. By and by she approached the spot more and more frequently, and it seemed as if an irresistible force drew her to the telephone. Then she stretched out her hand to lift the receiver. But then a door banged in the region of the kitchen, and at once she withdrew her hand as if it had been burnt, and she resumed her restless pacing. Then everything was quiet again, and Hedvig was again at the telephone. In a low, unsteady voice she asked for a number. After which her voice, with a tremendous effort, rose and became tense, haughty, commanding.

"May I speak to Mr. Levy?"

But the tension died away in a disappointed, dissatisfied tone.

"I see—not in yet. . . ."

Hedvig resumed her cell-walking. She mumbled to herself and looked, if possible, even paler than before. Incessantly she looked at the clock in despair that the minutes passed so slowly through the silent and sunny room.

For the second time Hedvig was drawn to the telephone. Now at last he had come to the office. The cool relief suddenly made her voice indifferent, hard, businesslike.

"Good morning! It is Mrs. Hill speaking. I only wanted to remind you of those mortgages that were to be attended to . . . those in . . ."

Levy's voice answered over the 'phone, stern and assured, with an imperceptible note of satisfaction.

"Yes, of course, the mortgages. . . . Yes, that will be all right. . . . I will come out to dinner, *if I may*, then we can talk it over. . . ."

It was not the first time Levy had invited himself to dinner at Hill villa. Probably in the correct surmise that his client would never be able to make up her mind to do it.

Hedvig put the receiver down with a shrug of the shoulders—a wretched, false little shrug. She resumed her walking. You could see how she tried to convince herself that she was quite cool and indifferent now that her anxiety lest he should forget the mortgages was over.

Her steps halted suddenly in front of one of the patches of sunlight on the carpet. It looked as if she dared not venture out on that red sea of light. It looked as if the spring sun, which flooded the large, silent room in ever greater volume, had dazzled and paralysed her.

Good God! What was she to do before dinner? How was she to occupy herself the whole of this long, pitiless, radiant spring day?

She found no way out but the usual one—to fly to the shadows. She rang the bell and ordered her car.

"Shan't we begin with the open car soon, Madam?" said Ohlsson, the chauffeur.

"No!"

So the big, black, covered car ran out to the cemetery. And then Hedvig sat there on the seat by Percy's grave, from which she had not allowed the dry, withered funeral wreaths to be removed. Erect, motionless, she sat under her black sunshade, whilst all around the light May green sparkled and swayed in the broad stream of sunlight. The sun appropriated even Hedvig's black silk cloak and made it live and shimmer with a thousand colours. But her face was only lit up by a faint reflection from below, from the marble of the tomb.

It was more than a year and a half since Percy had died, but lately Hedvig had begun to take refuge here again. Here she fought her way back to the life of shadows, a thin

life, a continuation of their life in the sanatorium. Not that she was able to forget even here on the seat in the cemetery all that consumed her: money, business, and everything connected with it. No, but she thought of it with less anxiety. Rather with a solemn and pious feeling that it was her duty to watch over what her dear Percy had left behind. . . .

There was something strange about Percy Hill. He had been a poor invalid, and yet his character had been so free from any mean fears that even long after his death his memory acted as a sedative. As Hedvig sat there her heart filled with quiet gratitude that she had been given the joy of sacrificing some years of her life to him. She no longer suffered for having lied to him and cheated him in his last wish. She had only been the nurse who prevented her poor patient from injuring himself. Her conscience closed its eyes to the circumstances attending her patient's death.

No, there was no danger in sitting there whispering to her memory, that sentimental liar. Her egoism was not frightened of the past, but of the future.

What a challenge to all the powers of the spirit, this feeble, mute, half-concealing lie in the midst of the clear sunshine! It seemed as if the light in sudden anger had surged around her with increased intensity; had sent a fresh wave of burning restlessness through her body. She rose and seemed to grope after the receding shadows. Then with dazzled, burning eyes she staggered along the cemetery path. Outside the gate her motor hummed, impatient to rush her back to all that waited for her . . . business . . . Levy . . . the future! . . .

"I won't change," Hedvig thought in the car. She found there was something safe, reassuring, in the fact that she did not intend to put on different clothes. But when she came home she did so all the same. And she sat long before the mirror. And then she stood in the window looking down the road.

At last there came a car and Levy got out.

"Taxi," thought Hedvig, as if she could blunt the point of a threat with that prosaic reflection. Levy ran quickly up the stairs. "Jew," she thought, as if by doing so she had kept something at bay. But all the same she had to force herself to walk slowly, really slowly, out into the hall to receive her guest.

Levy had brought some yellow roses.

"If there were black roses, I should give you them instead," he said.

Hedvig forgot the roses on a table in the hall on purpose. She had a sensation that he flushed up for a moment beneath his even pallor.

There were primroses and lilac on the dining-table.

"Those flowers don't suit you," he said, with a quick, bitter smile. Then he turned to the maid who was serving: "Take away those flowers and fetch my roses out of the hall!"

He seemed quite at home.

Then Levy threw himself into business and made good progress from the start.

Levy had made money live for Hedvig—too much so. At first she had regarded her large fortune as a safe protection against all the demands and dangers of life. She sat huddled up in the middle of her gold-heap where nothing could reach her. But Levy had thrown out his hands.

"Good God, what money! What a heavy, shapeless mass! What an old, moss-grown stump of a fortune! For twenty years it has had to take care of itself. For twenty years not a single experienced hand has touched it. It looks like a fund for widows and orphans."

"You mean that the investments are safe as a rock," mumbled Hedvig. "But surely that is a good thing!"

"Yes, but the interest, Mrs. Hill, the interest! You don't get much more than three and a half per cent., and you could get six. You allow a hundred thousand a year to run through your fingers. That is to make yourself a laughing-stock to God and man. As an expert I can't bear to see such an absurdity. Allow me to make some dispositions for you. You can submit them for the approval of your brothers."

Hedvig worried and pondered long before she said yes. But the hundred thousand were stronger than her fears. And thus Levy had lured her into his world, the money-world. She began by questioning him on all occasions in a woman's way, ignorantly, persistently, suspiciously. And he would reply. He answered not only patiently but willingly, quickly, ardently, enthusiastically. He explained the whole economic mechanism of credits, bills, mortgages,

debentures, shares. The whole of this finely balanced system of suspicion and confidence made a deep impression on Hedvig. To her over-cautious spirit it seemed like balancing on the edge of the abyss. His quick, purposeful assurance seemed to her something creepy, almost supernatural. But she had to hear more and more. Oh, it was deliciously exciting to hear Levy talk of money. It was only now she began to grasp what money was. And she felt as if she were in a swing feeling giddy at the fact of owning so much.

Yes, Levy's interest became more and more eager. Hedvig had already been lured from her gold-heap where she had enjoyed the twilight. Her money was no longer like a wall protecting her against the world. No, it was instead a medium in which she moved about. It formed the thousand connections, the tentacles, and nerves, thanks to which she at once felt what was happening in the town, in the country, in Europe, in the whole world.

Levy tore Hedvig with him half-way into life, at least into that kind of life which consists of movement and business. He showed to her confined and numbed egoism another kind of egoism that was world-embracing, intensely awake, and technically brilliant. He was the personification of that egoism. It was something different from Percy's *laissez-aller* and cool, submissive irony. It was wheels that rolled. It was diamond cut diamond. It was power, destiny. Hedvig sometimes became quite frightened at his passionate discourse, frightened as if she had come out into the strong daylight without a dark corner to which to retreat. And she no longer had her money to protect her. It had become his confederate, it betrayed her to him, it was in love with him. Hedvig had no way out but to assume a forced reserve, a sudden cold, and sheer rudeness. But that had no effect on him at all. He was insensitive to everything which was not logic. Then in her anxiety she crept behind her dead husband, draped herself in crape, fled to the shadows, and became just piety and memory. That was the only thing that hitherto could damp Levy's eagerness. The world-embracing, hot and cold romance of money shrank up violently, and he became gradually colder and colder, more formal and more ironical, till at last he said good-bye with a bow that was really a shrug of the shoulders.

So to-day Mrs. Hedvig had to assume her crape.

During the soup, Levy raised the question of the mortgage. That was a mere nothing, a bagatelle. They would buy the house by auction, no doubt about that. It would certainly be good business, because the house was, as it happened, valued much too high. Other people are frightened of houses that are assessed too high. But we are not, Mrs. Hill. For we know of a certain little insurance company that will take the house with open arms. They need it on their books. A house that is bought for 200,000, but can be taken in at 300,000, improves the position at once by 100,000—not for the shareholders but for the Board of Directors.

Levy's face suddenly became contemptuous and almost offended. This topic seemed to upset him. It was not worthy of the occasion or of his feelings.

"Well, that's that!" he exclaimed. "I am tired of the house property swindle. That's for inferior people, Philistines and small fry. I really can't understand your brother Peter's taste. I admit that he has a brutal sort of natural business shrewdness, but he lives like an old-fashioned craftsman amidst modern improvements. Before 1905 we believed that business consisted in cheating each other and the State. Yes, I believed it too. But that is now old fashioned, hopelessly old fashioned. Nowadays we have at last grasped the fact that the really lucrative business is the positive one in which money really makes a contribution. . . . That is to say, shares, industrial shares! We live in the age of a most tremendous industrial boom. The whole world is becoming industrialised. You must be blind not to see in which direction the royal road of capital leads. Money and wheels are related. Shares, industrial shares! Invest your money in forests, waterfalls, and iron mines! Send it to the sawmills, the harbours, and the ammunition works!"

Here Levy swallowed the third glass of mineral water, and broke out into a vehement flood of share quotations and statistics of exports. And all the time he stared at Hedvig with an expression that was at once appealing, passionate, embittered, and sceptical. He wanted to dazzle her, make her enthusiastic, but there was something spasmodic and almost despairing in his efforts. There was not a spark of real and innocent joy in the present moment.

Did he see through her, this woman before him, or did he suffer from the fact that the passionate pulses of his

heart were only capable of stirring the shes of some dry calculations?

Hedvig stared at the tablecloth. She felt his glance on every point of her face and neck. His harsh, quick voice at the same time opened up the whole world for her and spun her into a net of supple meshes. It was already as if she could not move hands or feet. He seemed to her to come closer, closer. She intermittently felt hot and cold in this strange heat with cold currents that streamed out from his being. Quickly, relentlessly, the terror rose in her, the irresistible terror of seeing herself cut off from any possibility of escape, overpowered.

She suddenly got up from coffee.

"Shall we not do the round of the pictures to-day?" she said. "It is the first time it has been light enough after dinner."

The round of the pictures was an invention of Hedvig's fear. She felt safer amongst Perov's pictures.

Levy rose slowly and offered Hedvig his arm. The tension in his face broke down. He was evidently not pleased to have to leave his own special field of attack and to have to resort to a slow, roundabout strategy in order to fight with a dead man.

And yet Levy could certainly talk of art, in case of need. He was a connoisseur in his own way, and had a great deal to say not only of market values but also of theories and technique. There were various things here that he could tell some malicious stories about, various things he was prepared at once to slaughter with his criticism, but also some things he had to admire. But it was a jealous, inarticulate admiration. Levy bit his lip and kept silent. To come up against the dead husband all the time made him, Jacob Levy, barrister, embarrassed and uncertain of himself. He knew much, but not how to battle with a shadow.

Hedvig found time to breathe. And she at once started the game of "Chinese shades." It was really a game in her own style, silent, stealthy, and unconsciously false. She had had many and long rehearsals of it out there by the grave. Every accent of her voice was reminiscent of crape. Solemnly she advanced through the rooms which the evening light was filling with its first pure tones of gold. She stopped with head inclined before one picture after the other. In

every gesture, in every word, she simulated admiration for her dead husband's fine understanding of art and for the modest, unselfish enthusiasm that never failed in spite of exhaustion and suffering.

A good dose of almost religious piety was administered to Levy. But he evidently did not like the medicine. His pallor was tinged with green. His lips curved into an imperceptible, nervous grimace. But he had to swallow it all the same. It was only when they had come out into the hall among the modern things that he suddenly plucked up his courage again amidst these new, more reckless, and more highly coloured surroundings. With a solemnity that was more austere than ever—perhaps because it required more effort—Hedvig halted before an animal painting, signed by a not unknown French artist. The picture represented two tigers, as innocently striped as if they had been painted by a child of five. They were playing in a jungle which seemed to consist of a ragged bouquet of dried grass.

Then Levy could keep silent no longer: "I know a little story about that master," he exclaimed eagerly. "Two Parisian Jewish dealers had a good lunch together and then went down to the *Salon des Indépendants*. And there one of the Jews made a bet with the other that inside a year he would take up and make famous any one of the exhibitors. And the other Jew walked about a long time searching till he found the most hopeless and impossible painter in the whole gigantic exhibition. He chose this painter. But the other was not frightened. He quickly created for the tiger painter a new school of art, which was dubbed 'naivism,' and in one year he became, as a matter of fact, world-famous. There you see the power of advertisement and of the Jewish genius."

Of course Hedvig, in her inmost heart, understood Levy much better than the picture. But we are all most sensitive about our lies. And she also grew angry because she felt again that she was losing her supremacy and began to feel unsafe. That's why she regarded his blasphemous story as an insult to Percy's memory.

"An artist may be great even though he has been run by an unscrupulous Jew," she mumbled. "This picture was, as a matter of fact, bought before the Jews made it expensive. And it was the general opinion amongst my husband's friends that it was a real find."

Hedvig began an eager defence of the striped tigers and the ragged dried grass. She used expressions that she had heard on Percy's lips during the art discussions down in Montparnasse and from the time when he tried in vain to convince her of the new ideals. She stole his phrases, his catchwords, his characteristic abbreviations, his little jokes, and even his trick of bending his head on one side and looking through half-closed eyes.

So the game of "Chinese shades" was followed by a plundering of the dead. All that she could lay hands on was now used as a weapon against the insistent Levy. Truly, human beings play strange games with each other.

Levy suddenly looked very tired. There was something pathetic about his raised shoulders. He had one of his fits of inevitable truth-telling. But his quick, harsh voice was unsteady.

"Why do you lie to me, Hedvig?" he mumbled. "You were an enemy to all art whilst your husband was alive. Yes, I know it. And you are still to this day indifferent to all this. And all the same you let loose these striped tigers on me. Why can you never be sincere, Hedvig? Why are you so afraid that you must always lie?"

Hedvig froze up and was silent. Every nerve in her was chilled. Never had any one dared to come so near to her. It seemed as if this man had dared to see more of her than she herself had seen. She kept absolutely motionless, like an animal hamming death to escape a danger. And still—did she not feel deep, deep down a sort of wild relief, something of the same kind as she had felt once when hearing Peter's cynicisms, though deeper, finer? . . .

Levy stretched out his hand.

"Good-night! I am a little tired. I must go now. I will look after your mortgage. Good-bye—till next time!" And then he was gone.

Hedvig went to bed, though it was still daylight. She was accustomed to go to bed immediately after his visits. She longed to lie motionless on her back and think.

Hedvig undressed slowly and carefully. She still felt her nerves trembling. For a moment she stood naked before the big mirror built into the wall. Her body was wonderfully well preserved. In its pale, even whiteness, its slim roundness, it seemed to her wonderfully young, immensely

younger than she herself. And still it made her shudder. It might betray her to love—at any moment it might betray her to love. . . . And some day it would relentlessly deliver her to death. Yes, Hedvig belonged to those in whom nakedness always awakens thoughts of death. If she had lived some hundred years earlier her fear would have driven her to self-torture. Then she would have scourged and martyred her body in order to blunt the point of death.

She quickly drew the blinds and crept beneath the bed-cover. She slept in Percy's old bedroom, that solemn debauch in the architecture of the 'nineties which had once aroused her frightened amusement when she came there as nurse. The bed still resembled a gigantic catafalque; in the vault of the alcove, the zodiacal signs gleamed, and in the twilight on the opposite wall the blood dripped from Saint Sebastian's naked sides. . . .

Hedvig knew that she had a long, sleepless night in front of her. With her eyes half closed and her hands stretched by her sides, she went slowly and carefully through all that had passed between her and Levy. In the silence she weighed his gestures, his looks, his tones, and his actions. There was something in them that she revelled in, slowly sipping, drop by drop, like a frightened drinker. It was a lonely, selfish joy, separated from the world by walls of darkness and silence.

But by and by she grew more restless, sighed, and turned over beneath the bedclothes. She felt that she was approaching a thought that always recurred with terrible regularity during her nightly meditations. Levy was her lawyer. Why did he not charge her anything? She had asked once, long ago, what she owed for the winding-up, but she had received an evasive answer. Since then they had not discussed that point. Did he not want to accept anything? He might have asked for a very large sum. She could not help enjoying the thought of having, perhaps, escaped it. But then came the frightened afterthought: Why does he not want anything? Of course because it imposes an obligation, because he wants you to become his. He may ask you to be his wife any day.

Levy was no longer a harmless, gently stimulating, caressing shadow. He stood there by the side of her bed terribly alive and with pale face and harsh, passionate voice,

hotly demanding his rights. And behind him roared the whole traffic of the vast opening world. She had to answer yes or no. She knew she could not escape that moment. Yes or no. Torn between jubilation and agony she writhed in the darkness. She could not quite set aside her passion. Her egoism trembled to the very roots. She dreamt frightened dreams of being permitted at long, long last to bare herself, give herself up, be freed from herself, to fling all her misery into the flames of love.

But in the midst of her excitement she suddenly became cold as ice. Horribly clear a voice sounded inside her: "Supposing he only wants your money!"

Then suspicion and anxious greed rushed over her with a thousand reasons. She tormented herself systematically with her sister's and brothers' shrugs of shoulders, sarcasms, and covert warnings. Levy's sharpness, his genius for business, his legal acumen, all that she had profited by in him seemed now to bear witness against him. "Yes, it is my money he wants," she mumbled—"of course it is my money." And now she forgot his looks, his accents, and the unsteadiness of his voice. And the memory of her own white body in the mirror could no longer warm her with a single spark of self-confidence. No, it is my money he wants. And perhaps he does not even mean to marry me to get it. Perhaps he will simply use his position to cheat me, trick me, and rob me. He must have seen that I don't understand business. Perhaps he is just now planning how he can take all I have from me, and ruin me.

So Hedvig passed hours of grinding agony, till, calmed by the morning light, she fell into a short sleep.

A few days later she stood again at the telephone, ringing up Levy. Now it was a question of some timber shares that she had bought on his advice and that had gone down a few crowns.

On the 15th of June, Selamb's Ltd. had its annual meeting. That was the last permitted day according to the articles of association. Peter could never make himself pay any dividends a single day before he must.

The meeting was, as usual, held in the office at Selambshof. Hedvig came early, so that the others should not be able to meet and talk about her. For weeks she had worried over

this meeting, at which Levy would again meet her sister and brothers. A few years ago—on Laura's and Stellan's recommendation—he had been allowed to buy a few shares, and had been elected to the Board, chiefly in order to keep an eye on the managing director.

Peter was extremely obliging. He stalked about arranging chairs and distributing writing-blocks and pencils. He always looked frightened nowadays at these meetings, and to-day more so than usual.

Levy came late, in a hurry, with his coat buttoned, as impersonal as a chapter of a law book. He bowed stiffly and sat down at once in his usual place—the Chairman's place at the writing-desk.

"Well," said Peter, "shall we elect a Chairman for the annual meeting? Is anybody proposed?"

Laura played with the chain of her little gilt handbag. She was dressed in black-and-white stripes and had a very tight skirt. It was in that year that skirts began to be worn tight. She still had her golden hair and her smooth skin. And all the same you could clearly see that she had aged. Her voice sounded cold, the playful purring had gone.

"I beg to propose Stellan," she said.

Hedvig was huddled up in her corner, staring at Levy. Now he will look at me, now he thinks I shall say something, she thought, and grew cold all over her body. But Levy did not. Perhaps he grew a shade paler, but he looked at Laura with an amused little smile. Then he calmly put away his papers.

"I beg to second the last honourable speaker," he said. "The more so as I have things to say which do not come well from the Chair."

Peter's voice sounded like that of a ventriloquist:

"Is the meeting agreed on this?"

"Yes," said Levy in a loud voice. Then he left his place and demonstratively went and sat down beside Laura on the sofa, where he took up a foreign newspaper and began to study the quotations.

So Stellan was Chairman. He seemed to take up the hammer without any enthusiasm, and now and then cast embarrassed side-glances at his predecessor. They then proceeded to the adjustment of votes. When they came to Tord Selamb, one hundred shares, absent, Levy pricked up his ears.

" Mr. Chairman," he said, in an indifferent tone, " this is now the third year that Mr. Tord Selamb neither appears in person nor sends a proxy Is that not strange ? "

Stellan looked inquiringly at Peter.

" I suppose the meeting has been properly convened ? He has been called ? "

Peter searched his papers.

" Tord does not care a damn for old Selambshof," he muttered in a reproachful tone. " He does not care a damn for anything ! . . . "

" Supposing the reason is that he has sold his shares," said Levy without looking up from his paper.

Now it was Stellan's and Laura's turn to prick up their ears.

" Sold ? To whom should he have sold them ? "

• Both looked threateningly at Peter.

Levy continued :

" We can safely strike Mr. Tord Selamb off the list of voters. Because I happen to *know* that for three years he has not possessed a single share."

" How do you know that ? "

" That's very simple. I wrote and asked him."

" But Tord does not answer letters."

" No, not the first. But perhaps the third if it makes him really furious. In the end I got the answer wrapped up in a parcel of abuse. He has sold his shares."

Stellan rose and stared at the managing director of the company.

" Peter, have you cheated him out of his shares ? "

Peter resembled a bear which has been smoked out of his den. He growled nervously and beat about him with half-paralysed paws.

" H'm, well, damn it all, what was I to do ? . . . He begged me to help him. . . . "

Laura rose, purple with anger.

" You are a wretched scoundrel," she cried, " a wretched scoundrel ! For three years you have cheated us ! "

Stellan fidgeted at his sister's vulgar expression.

" Please tell us immediately what you paid Tord," he said stiffly. " Otherwise I will adjourn the meeting and go out myself to Järnö to find out."

Peter stood there rocking and shuffling his feet. His eyes grew smaller and smaller in his head.

"Well, seventy-five thousand," he mumbled, with a grin that was now rather pleased than embarrassed.

Laura seemed on the point of flying at him.

"Seventy-five thousand! What a pretty business! We can understand you wanted to keep it to yourself!"

Stellan looked as if he had bitten into a very sour apple. He was apparently exercising his art of formulating things.

"It will be our common duty to take care of Tord when he has finally ruined himself," he said. "Thus it is only reasonable that his shares should be distributed equally among us."

"Never!" said Peter—"never! never!!"

But Stellan was cold as the grave.

"In that case, you cannot count on being re-elected. There is only one way in which to regain our confidence."

"Yes; you will be instantly kicked out if you don't share alike," assured Laura. "We will make Stellan director instead."

Peter growled, beat about, threatened, whined, but in the end he had to say good-bye to his fine little stroke of family business.

"But it went off all right for three years," he mumbled, with a melancholy grin. "Twenty-five shares per head at seven hundred and fifty each. It is little short of a godsend."

After this quarrel in the orthodox Selambian fashion they resumed their seats and proceeded with smoothed foreheads and clear eyes with the agenda.

Hedvig had been sitting silent the whole time staring at Levy. She thought of the strong family feeling of the Jews, and their racial *esprit de corps*. She searched nervously for a look of disgust and contempt in his face. The whole meeting occasioned her a new and mysterious torment. The harshness of their cold voices jarred on her. She felt strangely weak and moved. She had suffered and struggled during those last weeks and now she was tired, tired. She wanted to stand up and propose that they should give poor Tord what the shares were worth. The words burnt her tongue. Never before had Hedvig been so near the mellow and fragrant shores of life. If only Levy had reacted, if only she could have seen the proper pained expression on his face. But she could only discover a half-amused and half-contemptuous curiosity behind his Oriental mask. And

so she never rose up from her chair. And so the words remained unsaid. And so she believed that he was cold and hard like the others. . . .

And yet Levy had fought like a lion just for her sake. He had disclosed what he knew only in order to disarm Stellan and Laura, whose opposition and ill-will he had foreseen. There is no time to sit and turn up your nose when you are fighting for the object of your passion. And must he not be pleased when he saw the magnificent effect of his information? I have made myself indispensable, he thought. Now they can't have the impudence to turn me out. . . .

But Levy had reckoned without his host.

Without any further quarrels they had gone through the annual report and accounts, agreed the balance-sheet, approved the action of the directors, settled the dividend, and had now come to the election of the new Board. Stellan's fingers travelled thoughtfully along the edge of an inky paper-knife. He seemed to want to sit on only half of the old, worn, dirty office chair.

"May I ask the meeting to propose new members of the Board?"

There was another silence. The room smelt of dust, pipe-smoke, dry paper, and old sun-dried leather. The shadows of the elm branches in the garden moved sleepily across the knots in the worn floorboards. Then Laura's voice sounded again, clear, dry, and cold:

"I beg to propose Peter and Stellan and then—Mr. Sundelius."

Sundelius was the manager of a rival firm of Levy's with whom he was moreover engaged in a lawsuit. Nothing could be more outspoken. Levy took a long puff at his cigarette.

"Excuse me, but has Sundelius any shares in the company?" he mumbled.

Laura smiled an exquisite little smile and played with her suede shoe beneath her striped silk skirt.

"Yes; I have sold a couple to him."

Then Stellan's voice sounded, far away and impersonal:

"Has any one anybody else to propose?"

Levy suddenly looked at Hedvig. Yes, now he looked at her inquiringly, exactingly, severely. It seemed as if his black pupils would draw her out of her silent corner.

He made a gesture. It was something indescribable, something between a shrug of the shoulders and a passionate, supplicating seizing of a receding cloak, the gesture with which one appeals to a hardened miser in a bazaar in the East. Did she not see how they were playing with him, sneering at him, wanting to kick him out? Had he helped her or had he not? Were they friends or not? Did he love her or not? Were they to marry or not?

Hedvig sat there fingering her pencil. Her face was white. She shivered for cold. What was it Levy asked of her? Yes, only that she should propose the re-election of the present Board. She must do it at once or it would be too late. But why did she not say what she had to say? Why could she not move her tongue? Why was she so afraid of her own voice?

Hedvig's glance left Levy and roamed about the room. Ugh! how many eyes about her—how horribly many! There sat Stellan pretending to look at his nails, there Peter sat staring and sulking, there Laura eyed her with cold scorn. And they all waited for her confession. Go on, admit now that you are in love with Levy! Call out to anybody who cares to listen that you are in love with Levy.

Hedvig sat there as if paralysed, incapable of moving either hand or tongue.

She was silent—and condemned herself to silence for all her life.

Then Stellan's voice sounded with cruel, calculated hardness:

"May we consider that the nomination of candidates is concluded?"

"Yes," said Laura.

"Does the meeting elect the candidates proposed: Peter Selamb, Stellan Selamb, and Mr. P. Sundelius?"

"Yes," said Laura in a loud voice.

The hammer fell.

Levy rose. He was perhaps paler than before. Nobody could see whether his hands trembled, for he had put them in his trousers pockets. His voice sounded steady:

"Well, then, I have nothing more to do here. The fee due to me as a member of the Board you will perhaps allow me to forego for the benefit of your brother, Mr. Tord Selamb, whose circumstances I consider deserving of compassion."

And with that Levy left the annual meeting of shareholders in Selambs Ltd.

All eyes turned maliciously toward Hedvig's corner. They forgot Levy's sarcasm to enjoy their triumph.

"Ugh! how nice to be rid of the Jew," laughed Laura. "It was really wise of you, Hedvig, not to persist in clinging to that knave of spades."

"He is really an impossible person," said Stellan. "His father came to Sweden on foot with a bundle on his back."

Peter wanted to add his straw to the heap too, though he did it in a somewhat strange way.

"If I had followed that scoundrel's advice I should still have had Tord's shares," he muttered. "He advised me to transfer the shares in his name, then we two and Hedvig would have been able to outvote you. But I thought it was too devilish."

This was a lie, a clumsy lie. Hedvig knew it, and still she remained silent and allowed her mind to be poisoned. Yes, she sat there with a face that shrank in pale, shivering misery and allowed them to thrust the sting into her love. Their cold, malicious joy even gave her a sort of miserable relief. It soothed her wound. At last she managed to rise and go out. At the door she suddenly turned round.

"I don't know why you make such a fuss about Levy," she mumbled. "I think he is useful to run errands."

In the car Hedvig sat and repeated these words to herself as if she had been afraid of losing them. She got out in town and walked about for hours in the streets. She would have turned to a statue of ice if any one had whispered to her that she did so in the secret hope of meeting Levy. But when she came home she kept near the telephone the whole evening. If he rings up now and reproaches me, she thought, how shall I make him understand that it is quite hopeless to expect anything of me? It was late when, with a sigh, Hedvig tore herself away from the telephone. Then she lay on her bed in the cool green half-light of the summer night. To-morrow he will come, of course, she thought. He will be pale, bitter, sarcastic. He stops in front of me without stretching out his hand. "What do you mean? Have I deserved this treatment? Are you so ungrateful and hard? Or do you mistrust me? Have they told you I want your money? But that is a lie, you know it is! I love you,

Hedvig! I can't live without you! You must be my wife."

Hedvig lay quite still and felt the blood burning in her veins as in a fever after an ague. Yes, then I must tell him—that I can *never* be his wife, she thought. But it was a strange trembling "*never*." She longed with every fibre of her being to hear those reproaches, that prayer which she thought to refuse.

It was not Levy who came the following day, but a letter from the firm of solicitors, Levy & Östring, containing a bill for thirty-five thousand crowns for winding-up costs and various other commissions.

Poor Levy! There was a sort of helplessness in this revenge. His thoughts were cast almost exclusively in terms of money. He could not grow furious without figures buzzing in his ears. That's why his wounded pride and aching love found expression in a heavy bill of costs. Yes; for he had really loved Hedvig with a passion that was not less because it was embittered and clear-sighted.

Levy's revenge had much more effect than he had suspected. He had, as a matter of fact, sent Hedvig a bull of excommunication that was to part her completely from life and mankind.

"There," was her first thought, "he did want to plunder me! He wanted my money and nothing else."

And she felt confirmed in all her old morbid suspicions. There were only cheats and crooks in the whole world, and Levy was one of the worst of them.

But at the same time the last shreds of the veil of charity were torn from her feelings. She knew now that she had loved him, that she still loved him in spite of all; that she would never be rid of an aching pain in her heart.

That was the climax of a mute and humiliating drama in which love fought a hopeless fight against mean fear. Hedvig remained with her poor gold.

Yes; she clung convulsively to the money for which she had sacrificed all. She could not transact any new business herself, but, strange to say, and in spite of her distrust, she allowed all Levy's investments to stand. But she collected her papers, pondered, and calculated. Down in the vaults of the bank and at home in her villa she sat and counted and counted. Like the hermit with his rosary she sat mumbling, letting one figure after the other slip between her fingers.

Levy's letter accompanying the bill she did not answer. Perhaps it was her timid unwillingness to reveal anything. Perhaps it was a secret hope that he would call himself.

In the end, Mr. Levy had to take proceedings to get his money.

Hedvig no longer drove out to Percy's grave. The shadow game was over. She no longer needed the dead to protect her against the living. And though she now more and more rarely went outside the house she no longer glanced at Percy's collections. It was really a strange whim of fate that just such a being as she should steal about in that big house, built as a home of Art.

On a sultry and still summer evening Hedvig rose with smarting eyes and throbbing temples from her papers in the bedroom. She had an idea that people stared at her down at the bank, and she had therefore brought everything home—shares, mortgages, title-deeds, deposit receipts, bank-books, and bundles of notes. And now it was difficult in the evenings because she did not dare to light the light from fear of being seen from the outside through the chinks in the blinds. She sat over her papers till the figures swam together in a grey mist and there was a pricking sensation in her eyes. Then she crept to the door to see that the towel was hanging over the keyhole, so that none of the servants should peep in. Then she stole slowly, stopping all the time to listen, towards the big, built-in wardrobe where she had found a good hiding-place behind an old carved chest. When her treasure was hidden, she noiselessly opened a window and looked out to see if anybody moved.

Hedvig stood long in the window. The evening was sultry and heavy. Far below the firs lay a woolly darkness. Above, a few faint scattered stars hung in a sky to which the reflections of the neighbouring town imparted a reddish, ominous hue. Against this background she presently distinguished the quick, shadowy flight of the bats round the eaves, the soft flutter of the moths, the flight of the spiders with their long, helplessly suspended legs, all the mysterious fluttering and hovering things out in the big witches'-kitchen of the damp, warm summer night.

Hedvig felt a fever round her temples, a dull anxiety. All her silent, secret, suppressed feelings revived for the last

time and moved about in the darkness. It was the restlessness of the body in the presence of the relentless oncoming autumn that melted together with her dim, light-shy anxiety for her treasure.

Hedvig closed the window, pulled down the blind, turned on the light, and began to undress. She moved slowly, hesitatingly, sighing. At first she turned her back to the mirror, but by and by she stole one glance after the other into it. She was irresistibly drawn to the corner where the mirror stood. It seemed that the air there was not so still and burdened with loneliness. Before the mirror her movements quickened. With her glance fastened intently on her own image Hedvig loosened her hair and let her last garment fall to the floor. She had aged quickly of late, had grown grey about the temples, and had folds beneath her breasts. And now she suddenly screwed up her face, so that it was full of wrinkles, and emphasised the weariness of her pose. "I am old," she mumbled, "I am old." And it seemed as if she had huddled up under the lee of old age.

But Hedvig did not escape so easily. She did not deceive herself. With a jerk she straightened herself up again, threw back her head, lifted her arms behind her neck, so that her breasts seemed more beautiful. And she felt how a smile spread and opened out on her face. She saw it in the mirror, a strange, girlish, trembling smile with pouting mouth, ready to be kissed and bitten. She began to turn and sway to and fro as if she heard dance-music. Closer and closer her face approached the mirror. She felt a faint sickness as if in a swing, and the air felt hot round her temples. Beside her own nakedness she beheld in the unnatural gloom of the mirror-room the nakedness of St. Sebastian. The ropes cut into his beautiful limbs. The points of the arrows were softly embedded in the even, slightly bronzed flesh. . . . To Hedvig he suddenly assumed Levy's face. Yes, it was Levy's mouth which smiled at her. His lips had lost their scorn and smiled close to hers, ecstatically, sensually. His eyes had lost their sharp, shortsighted stare, and revealed black, fathomless depths of life and passion. His scorching breath rushed over her, his arms bent her irresistibly. . . .

Hedvig collapsed. Moaning and sobbing, she rolled on the carpet, whilst the last late attenuated rush of blood painfully fought its way through her bottom. . . .

SHADOW PLAY

Suddenly she started as if somebody had poured cold water over her. She seemed to hear footsteps and whispers outside. She flew to the switch, turned out the light, and listened again intently. Then she quickly put on some clothes and lifted the blind carefully. Trembling in her whole body, she lay there crouching and watched. At first she saw only the black darkness, but by and by she distinguished two figures, one dark and one light, down by the fence. They stood in the shadow of the firs tightly clasped together.

It was the chauffeur and the parlour-maid.

Hedvig was at once overcome by confused emotions of shame, indignation, and furious suspicions. The impudent, shameless, immoral rabble! Before my eyes! Of course they were spying through the chinks in the blinds. And now they are laughing at me between their kisses. Yes; I have seen them often exchange glances of secret understanding. Fancy if they have seen me with the papers, too. Fancy if they are conspiring to rob me. If they murder me one night and take everything and set fire to the house to hide their crime. . . .

Hedvig remained on her aching knees till the couple had passed through the gate and disappeared in the darkness of the forest. Then she dragged herself to bed and lay there listening with every nerve in the thick darkness. All the time she imagined she heard something move in the wardrobe. In the end she had to get up and bring the papers and the money into her bed. With her arm round the two heavy leather portfolios she at last fell into a restless slumber.

The following morning Hedvig dismissed the chauffeur and the parlour-maid. That was the beginning of the depopulation of Hill villa. Then she sold the car, and had a fire- and burglar-proof safe built into the wall in the wardrobe. When it began to grow cold in the autumn she closed up the picture galleries and only heated a few rooms. By that time both the cook and the other maid and the gardener had gone. She had only one servant left, an old, bad-tempered, silent, faithful servant of the Hill family.

The snow came, and Hedvig got up herself at dawn, so as not to be seen, and swept the snowdrifts from the gate. For long periods only one thin column of smoke rose from the chimneys to show that there was still flickering life in the big white villa. It gradually began to become a ghost-house.

VIII

TORD SAILS OUT TO SEA

WITH its knife-sharp stem the big motor-boat cut straight through the September storm. In the stern, Stellan and Laura were lying, well protected from both draught and spray by canvas and bevelled glass screens. The splash of the waves mingled with the sound of jingling of mirrors and trays in the elegant saloon.

"The motor runs nicely to-day," observed Laura.

"It always runs well when you are on your way to something disagreeable," mumbled Stellan.

"Do you think there is more vibration in the bows?"

"Of course there is, nearer the motor. Why do you ask?"

"The vibration is nearly as good as massage. I have not had any for a whole week. It's perfectly awful. I think I will move up there."

Laura stepped up to the bows. Her life was now characterised by an incessant struggle against incipient corpulency. She took massage, had gymnastics, played games, and rode. The fear of getting old forced her out of her feline laziness. She positively dared not sit still. If I rest or if I lie on my back, then old age will come over me, she thought. This new restlessness went hand in hand with an ardent desire to be in at everything, not to miss anything. She had fallen a helpless victim to the disease of seeing and being seen. Dances, first nights, private views, bazaars, matches;—everywhere you saw Countess von Borgk. And everywhere you saw her flirt with young men—preferably very young men.

It had not been exactly an agreeable surprise for Stellan to discover her at the great autumn shooting-party at Granö. Stellan was no longer fond of female company. His wife he fortunately escaped. She was always at the seaside or at some sanatorium, but Laura he often met. But with the old bachelor, Major von Brauner, he had thought he would

be free from her. Certainly Brauner had figured at Laura's gambling evenings out in Narvavägen, but Stellan did not know that relations had continued. Judge of his annoyance, then, when he turned in his motor-boat and saw his pretty sister on the pier: Laura in short skirts, with puttees on her legs, and a young painter fool carrying her gun.

And at dinner she came down, the only woman amongst so many men, half naked, wrapped in some green silk stuff that really cried aloud of her lost youth. And she herself gave the signal for the naughty stories: after, dinner. Grotesque!

As if that were not unpleasant enough, they began to talk about the neighbouring Järnö. And who should start that topic but Laura? She was half lying in her chair and told lots of stories about dear old Tord. There was a moment of painful silence, but as the family itself did not seem to mind . . . well, then, they let their tongues wag. Nobody mentioned such trifles as that Tord had the Governor of the province at him all the time for neglect. That was to be seen in any paper. But now he had put up big notices:

LANDING FORBIDDEN ON PENALTY OF DEATH

TORD OF JÄRNÖ.

And he actually did shoot at people who entered his waters. Von Brauner himself had once sought shelter there during a thunderstorm and had heard the bullets whiz about his ears. The people round about were so furious that an accident might happen at any moment.

"A philosopher who has read too much Darwin and Nietzsche," mumbled Stellan. "He wants to be a living protest against the more sentimental theories."

Stellan tried to save the situation by being objective at the same time as he appealed to the sportsman's individualism and the aristocratic prejudices of the company.

But Laura laughed.

"Nonsense; he is just mad. But, anyhow, madmen may be rather olly."

The following day Stellan left Gränö in order to go to Järnö and talk to Tord. It was not easy to get Laura to come with him, because she felt very much at home amongst the shooting-party. But now they were on their way, anyhow.

The motor-boat already began to plunge in the rougher and heavier seas of the big Järnö bay.

Stellan put on an oilskin and went up on the captain's bridge.

"Are you quite sure of the chart?" he asked the man at the wheel.

"Yes, sir; I was born in this neighbourhood."

Between the seas Stellan took the opportunity of looking down into the engine-room. Because he had his suspicions of Laura's vibration. The mechanic, who was a handsome, dark youth, might also have something to do with it.

Stellan was an old gambler, who was very frightened of leaving anything to chance.

The rocking of the boat soon made Laura leave the fumes from the engine-room and quietly creep into the saloon.

They were approaching Järnö. Tall and foreboding rose the dark, rusty-looking hill surmounted by its long castle. The boat steered straight for the entrance to the harbour.

Was the madman really going to shoot? Not even through his Zeiss-glasses could Stellan distinguish any sign of life.

Bang! A shot rang out above the lapping of the waves but nobody saw where it went.

"One ought to come here in warships," the man mumbled.

Stellan slowed down. They slipped under the lee of the hill beside a dilapidated old shed.

Another shot of welcome. This time the shot struck only a few yards to starboard. But it was impossible to discover who had fired it.

Laura cried out that she wanted to go back. Stellan looked as if he felt sick. He waved a handkerchief eagerly as a flag of truce. There were no more shots. The boat floated quietly in towards a tumbledown fishing-pier. But still no living soul was visible.

Stellan had some trouble in getting Laura out of the saloon. Not that he had any illusions about Tord's chivalry, but he felt safer all the same when he had her with him. Silent and hesitating they went ashore—still with the reports of the shots on their nerves. They passed through an old field which was now running wild and full of little shoots of birches and aspens, then they cut across a little garden quite

overgrown with pestilence weed, out of which a few half-suffocated black-currant bushes stretched up their arms like drowning people, whilst the poor, naked apple trees writhed in grey despair in front of a rotting cottage wall with broken windows and grass-grown porch. Nature crept in over the work of man and began to resume its power. Over the whole there lay, this gloomy autumn day, an indescribable odour of dampness, decay, and dismal neglect.

Shivering, Laura and Stellan took the path up the hill. Up there, whipped by the winds, the big house lay with its weathered logs, surrounded by a litter of empty tins and broken bottles.

Nobody came out when Stellan knocked. The door was not locked and they walked in. The big hall was cold, dirty, and filled with a strange smell of animals. The whole house shook in the gale, and on the windows towards the north a pine branch knocked persistently as if the wind wished to enter as a guest.

They cautiously penetrated farther. On one of the folding beds in the bedroom something lay huddled up under a reindeer skin. It moved when Laura lifted the fur rug, and an untidy head peeped out. It was Dagmar. She stared in dull amazement at the visitors, without recognising them.

"I am, Laura . . . Laura Selamb . . . and this is Stellan."

"Oh, I see, it's you. . . ."

Dagmar crept down. She was dressed in some grey rags. She had the grey complexion of the really poor; she looked emaciated, worn out. She gave at the same time the horrible and pitiful impression of a starved and tormented woman. She shook herself, and her teeth chattered.

"I am lying down as I am not quite well."

"We wanted to speak to Tord," said Stellan. "Where is he?"

Dagmar's face hardened.

"I don't know at all."

"He greeted us with his gun, so he must be in the neighbourhood."

"I suppose he ran away when he recognised you. He is not very fond of visitors."

Then Dagmar suddenly approached Laura and stroked the smooth sleeve of her raincoat timidly, like a frightened dog.

"Goodness, how pretty you are! Do you know, I have not talked to a woman for several years?"

Laura shrugged her shoulders and giggled.

"Well, that is nothing to long for."

An expression of terror suddenly came over Dagmar's face.

"You must be hungry," she mumbled, "and I have only got a little salted herring."

Stellan went out and blew three short, sharp signals on a whistle. Then he returned.

"Don't trouble about food," he said. "My men will bring up all we need. But how shall we get hold of Tord?"

"Oh, he has not eaten anything to-day, and when he is hungry he will come and feed out of your hand."

The men soon arrived, carrying up boxes of food and wine. Dagmar excused herself for a moment and dived into a wardrobe to make herself smart. She returned, dressed in an old-fashioned, frayed, red silk frock which hung round her thin body. But there still glimmered a last spark of beauty in her features.

When dinner was over she went out into the porch and hammered a broken zinc tub with a poker and shouted into the forest:

"Food, food, food!"

It sounded like the cry of an angry bird through the roaring of the wind.

Tord did not come.

"Well, then, we can eat without the beast," said Dagmar.

Her eyes suddenly grew wet as she sank down by the dazzlingly white tablecloth. Such a lot of lovely food—so many fine bottles! And then there was the man with "Rapid" in white letters across his jersey, just like a footman behind her chair! And then Laura's jewels and Stellan's yachting-suit!

"Goodness me!" she mumbled. "Goodness me!"

And then she drank her first cocktail.

Stellan pointed to Tord's empty chair.

"How has our amiable host got into the habit of shooting at people who call on him?"

Dagmar quick'y drank her second cocktail. A wild smile lit up her face like lightning.

"He is afraid they will come and take me from him. . . . So you can see he is mad."

They ate for a moment in silence. The firelight from the logs in the fireplace flickered over the faces in the big, dark hall, which was still shaken by the gale and where the pine branch still persistently knocked at the window.

Knock, knock, knock! . . .

Dagmar drank and drank—with trembling hands and staring eyes. Suddenly she flung herself forward with her hands stretched across the table and her forehead on the cloth. She was seized by a paroxysm of weeping.

"It is terrible here," she mumbled—"it is terrible here! I shall never be a human being again, never!"

She again lifted her face, distorted and dirty from her tears. She shook her clenched fists, and by fits and starts there broke from her a wild and disconnected wailing over the drudgery, the loneliness, the hatred, the savagery of life out here on the storm-beaten cliffs.

"He is mad!" she cried. "Tord is mad! He can't bear to see people. He hides his money under trees. If I had not stolen from him, we should have starved to death!"

At the mention of money Laura pricked up her ears, and across Stellan's rigid mask a glimpse of a melancholy grin appeared. "There was thus at least something comprehensible in this misery.

"What happened to the money?" he mumbled.

Stellan was told. Dagmar's tears dried suddenly. She spluttered out fragments of the long, bitter monologues of years. Into her voice there entered the shrill accents of old quarrels. Peter had brought the money. And it was an enormous bundle of notes. But Tord did not put them into the bank. No; he pushed them all into a drawer, so mad was he. And he carried the key on a string round his neck. And he was mean with the money, so that he need not go into town and talk business any more. He wanted to be free from that mob, he said. The money must last as long as he lived. And that was why they went half starved, and dressed in old rags. In the end Tord got it into his head that they did not need any food from the shops, but could live by shooting and fishing. It was no use begging or talk-

ing, for then he simply went away. Once he lay out in the skerries for a whole fortnight, and then Dagmar had only some plaice to live on. But when Tord came home she saw no other way out than to make him drunk with his last bottle, and then she took the key and stole some of his money and sent the old gardener into town for winter supplies. For the old gardener was still alive then.

Tord said nothing when the old man came sailing back with his load of provisions. He was so hungry that he just threw himself over the food.

So things went on for a long time. Dagmar had learnt to open the drawer with a hairpin, and she had to watch for an opportunity to send the old man out when Tord was drunk or asleep. It seemed almost as if he acquiesced in the arrangement so long as he need not give out the money himself. But one day Dagmar found the drawer empty. All the notes were gone. She became dreadfully frightened. She began to spy on Tord to discover where he had hidden his money. And he was on his guard to see if she were following him. And thus they stole about silently and spied on each other like two criminals. And at last she managed to discover where he kept his treasure. It was in a hole underneath a tree root behind Mattson's barn. She took a whole bundle of notes and hid them for herself. Tord noticed that the pile had suddenly diminished, and he came home white with fury and threatened to kill her. But she defied him, and would not tell her hiding-place. And Tord did not find it.

One fine day the old gardener died. His pipe just fell out of his mouth and he was dead. Tord wanted to dig a grave for the old man down there without further ado. "We can say that he was drowned, if anybody asks," he said. Dagmar frightened him by saying that they would be arrested as murderers if they did not notify the death. At last she got him to put up the sails of his boat. Dagmar sat down in the deckhouse and cried. She felt as if she had lost both father and mother when they sailed to the cemetery with the old man.

And now she had only herself to fall back on if they were to keep body and soul together out there at Järnö. Soon everything was eaten up again, and Tord would not go to the shops. And when she herself was going to set out in

the skiff he had hidden the oars. She became so desperate that she sat down alone on the pier and howled like a wild animal. Then she remembered she had one more refuge, and that was her red blanket. She had arranged once with the storekeeper that if they were in distress she was to hang out a big red rug in the window of the big house. And then he would take the motor-boat and bring food to them. She had not much hope; she sat for an eternity out on the cliff only staring out over the water to see if the signal worked. On the third day a motor-boat actually rounded the point, and so their distress was staved off for that time. This had happened last autumn. The winter was cruel. They had no longer anybody to carry wood and water. Dagmar became ill from all the drudgery. For two months they were isolated, when the ice would neither break nor bear. At last the ice froze properly everywhere except over in the open fairway. But then the peasants smashed up the yacht which was lying in the steamer track through the ice, and then it was impossible to get across, as they were too weak to drag out another boat. People had begun to damage everything of Tord's that they could lay hands on—nets, piers, boats—so hated was he now. And Tord no longer swore and raged. He only walked about like a dumb animal for days and weeks together. And about that time the lamp oil also ran out, so that they had to sit there in the darkness in the evening after the logs in the fireplace had burnt out. So they sat in the dark and dared not let each other go, and still they couldn't help nagging. She was ill, and she wanted to die merely to annoy him. And he tried to keep quiet until she should go mad.

"Yes, this has been a terribly long winter," said Dagmar—"a terribly long winter."

After which she was quiet for a moment and sat there rocking her head and staring straight in front of her.

Laura had risen from the table and stood warming her back at the open fireplace.

"But why, in God's name, woman, why have you not left him long ago?" she exclaimed.

Dagmar started. It seemed as if she had been cruelly torn out of the voluptuous intoxication of at last shouting out her misery.

"Why didn't I leave him?" she mumbled. "It must be

because I am mad, because he has infected me, because I have not spoken to a woman for years. But now there must be an end. Now I must get away. Fancy, I was quite young when I came here—quite young and pretty! And look what he has made of me now!”

She tore her frock open and showed her thin neck and shrunken chest.

“Yes, that’s how I am now. I must get away. I must come with you to town. He says he will shoot me if I run away—but that doesn’t matter. I can’t live another winter out here anyhow.”

During Dagmar’s outpourings Stellan had been sitting motionless sucking an unlighted cigar. Now he exchanged a quick glance with Laura. Unpleasantness and scandal threatened from all sides. They must be careful. He called in the men and ordered them to clear the table and take the things down to the boat. Then he turned to Dagmar.

“To take you with us now is absolutely out of the question,” he said coldly. “But if you can persuade Tord to go abroad, preferably out of Europe, I am prepared to give you some money.”

Dagmar had begun to pull out some clothes at random and put them in a knapsack. She looked up and shook her head.

“You don’t understand,” she muttered hurriedly. “He is impossible. It is impossible to talk to him. I must get away!”

Stellan rose.

“Good-bye,” he said. “Thank you. We must get away before it grows dark. Think over what I have said.”

Dagmar stamped on the floor.

“No,” she cried. “I must come with you! You can put me ashore wherever you like. I can very well sleep in the gutter to-night! But I must get away!”

Laura and Stellan walked quickly out. Dagmar came after them, without hat, in her red silk frock and with her bundle in her hand. The gale tore her untidy fair hair. Mumbling, crying, stumbling, she ran after Laura and Stellan down the rocky hillside.

“If you don’t take me with you, I will throw myself in the water!”

And so she did. When by Stellan’s orders the man

pulled in the gangway and the boat began to back out she flung herself in, scorning death, with bundle and silk frock and all.

The men had to pick her up. Pale, shivering, dripping, but full of the determination of despair, she clung to the mast on the foredeck. But Stellan steered into the pier again. . . .

At that moment a grey figure appeared round the corner of the shed. It was Tord. For hours he had been sitting there in the smell of herrings, amongst torn nets, and worm-eaten decoy duck, and stared at an ant's trail that began in a hole in a floor-board and disappeared between some stones at the side of the lake. Now he walked half-way out along the tottering, dilapidated pier. He was dressed in a worn fur cap, grey Iceland sweater, and torn Lapp boots. In his hand he held a rifle. His rough, unshaven face was as grey as a lichen, shrunken, and set in hopeless defiance. For a moment he stood motionless, staring at Dagmar, who still tremblingly clung to the mast. The gusts of wind ruffled the pools on deck and tore at her wet, ragged skirt. The vibration of the motor set the water in the whole of the little harbour nervously trembling. It was as if the water, the boat, and the woman were shivering from the same cold squall.

"I can jump into the water again," she cried.

Stellan was going to jump ashore, but Tord fingered his rifle.

"Back!" he shouted. "Let go! You shall not land at my pier again. To hell with you all!"

Yes, that is what Tord cried out. For years he had watched over Dagmar like a Red Indian, so that she should not run away. But now he suddenly stood there telling her to go to hell!

Laura had settled down comfortably on the bridge. She pulled Stellan's arm.

"Don't say anything," she whispered. "Let us see what he will do. This is interesting. I have not seen Tord for many years. He really is interesting."

But Stellan took no notice of her. He was ashamed before his men and stepped up to Tord. He stood there straight and stiff in his yachting-suit with the mien of an officer before a drunken recruit.

"This won't do," he said in a low tone. "Damn it, what a figure you cut! You are completely impossible. If you will take your wife and go away to South America I will find the money."

Tord came face to face with his brother.

"South America? Because you have a badge on your cap? By your snobbish order? You just get aboard. Access to this island is forbidden by Tord Selamb!"

Tord planted the muzzle of his rifle in Stellan's stomach and forced him, with his fingers on the trigger, to retire on board. After which he took his curved knife and cut the moorings.

"Back!" he commanded again, and the man at the wheel obeyed.

The big red mahogany boat glided quickly out of the harbour.

Dagmar still clung to the mast and stared, shivering, at the lonely grey man out on the pier.

"The key of the larder lies under my pillow," she called. And there was suddenly a tremulous note of pity in her voice at the sight of his terrible loneliness.

Then she crept down in the machine-room.

They were already in the open. The gale had increased, and the motor-boat rolled and pitched in the high seas in Järnö bay. Laura got out some dry things for Dagmar. She looked up with a grimace at Stellan.

"Why the devil had you to go out to Järnö? There was more fun at Brauners'!"

Stellan shrugged his shoulders.

"It might be as well to have her with us. Tord will soon follow, and then we will deport them."

Tord did not see the motor-boat for a long while from the pier. It was hidden by a tongue of land. I won't go up the hill, he thought. What the deuce have I to do on the hill? But soon after he was up there all the same. The boat was visible far out in the channel. It looked like a dark spot on the grey waters. Sometimes there was a flash of light as it dashed through a big sea. It got smaller and smaller. He had to fasten his gaze upon it intently if the water was not to appear absolutely deserted. Then the boat disappeared far, far away beneath a grey headland.

Tord started. When his hand moved on to the rifle

barrel the steel was so cold that it burnt! Somebody had drawn a deep, moaning sigh. It must have been himself.

He was alone now. It was ghastly how everything suddenly grew in the loneliness, how everything grew big and heavy and terrible—the trees, the clouds, the wind, the sea.

Quickly, as if pursued by an enemy, he dived into his house. The fire had gone out. The pine branch still beat against the window: knock! knock! knock! He went up to the wall and tried with his hand the draught from a chink between the logs; then he suddenly rushed out into the kitchen and swallowed some remains of food. It was the first food he had tasted that day. A drop of wine was left in a glass. He poured it into him. Then he spat it out again, feeling nauseated. And then he was in the bedroom by Dagmar's bed. The pillow was still pressed down after her head. He raised his clenched fist for a blow, but suddenly stopped and raised the rifle that he still trailed with him. The shot went straight into the pillow, so that the feathers whirled about. Afterwards it became horribly quiet. Tord shivered. Why make a noise and shoot? There was nobody to hear him—nobody. Then the pine branch began to beat against the window again: knock! knock! No, he could not stay here!

Tord went down to the little reed-grown bay. He half ran, but stopped now and then like a child that stops crying for a moment to feel its pain. Down there the old yacht lay riding at anchor. For days and weeks its deck-house had been his last refuge when everything else was disgusting and hateful. The punt lay beneath the alder trees. Tord got it afloat and rowed out through the scattered, rustling reeds. On board the yacht the deck was covered with withered leaves. The water had risen up into the cockpit. Water is never so unpleasant as when, brown with rust from the ballast, it rises up in an old boat. Tord pumped. With difficulty he opened the swollen doors of the cabin. Down below it smelt of rotting oak, rotten ropes, mildew, and damp. He pushed away a lot of rubbish and lay down on a cushion. Flap, flap! went the eternal waves as they splashed against the stem. Rat-tat! the foresail halyard beat against the mast as the wind swept in. And the alders and the hill swung to and fro through the little window, to and fro, to and fro!

The chill rose out of the cold, stinking cushion so that

Tord could no longer lie on it. He climbed up on deck and began mechanically to hoist sail. The stiff grey hemp creaked in his hands. Out of the wet, mildewed folds of the sail crawled swarms of earwigs. The sheets were full of kinks and doublings. The boom suddenly knocked him down on the deck, but he rose groaning, pulled in the slimy, green anchor chain, and hauled up the anchor, which was a mass of mire and mud. Then he sprang to the helm.

As by magic the yacht found its way out through the narrow, difficult channel. Now it lay in Järnö bay, under the lee of the familiar hill. Black, gusty squalls puffed in all directions over the leader-grey water. At first the old hull did not seem to know what it wanted to do. The sails filled, shivered, and went over. The main-sheet struck off Tord's fur cap. He did not care. He sat huddled up by the helm looking at a feather that had fastened on his sleeve. He stared at the soft, white down that trembled at each puff. The memories of past kisses, caresses, and embraces softly, wonderfully softly, flattered his soul. There to starboard was the course to town, to the people, to Dagmar. . . . He fell away before an easterly gust; he was already out in the more steady wind of Järnö bay. . . . But then the yacht suddenly went about with whipping sails and headed out towards the open sea visible through "The Iron Door." Tord did not know why he had tacked. It was as if the old boat had known better than he.

As soon as Tord had rounded the point the gale cast itself upon him as if a window had blown in. The yacht luffed, slowed down with flapping sails, and vibrated till you could feel it through the whole hull. Then it slowly fell away and gathered speed.

Tord seemed to waken up. Beneath his blown, coarse tufts of hair his glance grew keen again. "By Jofe, now we shall have some sailing!" Muttering sturdy oaths, he worked himself up for a quarrel, a wild quarrel with his beloved old sea. It was the last thing he had to fight with. Everything else had gone.

He was still under the Kall-skerries, and the worst had not yet begun.

There are gales and gales. This was no puffing, impatient, spring squall, nor yet a black summer squall, but a big, heavy, autumn gale with all the grimness of the coming

winter behind it. It came from the north, too. Sky, water, and hills had all the hues of iron. The clouds hung with shades of darkish blue between the lighter clearings in the sky. The distant cliffs flashed suddenly with a ghostlike, dead, metallic sheen.

Now he would soon be out in the open sea. Now it was time to put about if ever he wanted to get back. But Tord did not. The sea was stronger than he.

East of Järnö the sea is almost always deserted. There are no buoys or lighthouses, no sails and no smoke from steamers. No man stood with glasses to his eyes following the death-struggle of the yacht out in the raging twilight of the sea.

Tord did not give in so easily. He sailed like an old sailor. He sat huddled up to windward and spat out the salt water and avoided the worst breakers. With a kind of pale and passionate devotion he saw the seas grow and grow. Every heavy, onrushing, crested wave out there in the desolate expanse was like a confirmation of something he had long, long known. Stiff with cold in his dripping rags, shivering to the very marrow with weariness, he felt a mysterious inward joy as both the boat and himself irresistibly succumbed. Then the peak blew down and the boom trailed in the water. Then the waves began to crash in through the missing hatch in the bows. It became more and more difficult for the heavy, half-disabled hull to lift itself out of the troughs. Then Tord was flung overboard just at the moment when the boat capsized and sank. He saw the faded red pennant at the masthead dive a few fathoms away from him. He still kept afloat; he was still swimming. But he did not swim towards the land, but farther out, towards the sea. The last thing he saw was a high, wonderfully tall, mountain of water, iron-grey, ice-green, rising above his head, with a crest of coldest, palest foam. In the middle of the wave he sucked the water into his lungs, lost consciousness, and passed away without pain.

Thus finished Tord Selamb's last great wild quarrel. Defiance, you might call it—a wild, mad defiance unto death. A philosopher might perhaps mumble something about the negative in all egoism. Tord had driven the Selambian selfishness to the point at which it annihilates itself.

I X

PETER'S TOMBSTONE

ONE cold winter day in the third year of the world-war Laura drove out to Lidingön. Private cars were no longer permitted, but she had borrowed the big sledge from Trefvinge.

Laura did not suffer at all from the biting cold ; she was too fat for that. She had given up the struggle, and had thrown herself in the arms of an ever-growing appetite. The nervous interest in food which had arisen during the great crisis had broken down her last timid resistance. Yes, now when other people grew thin she grew fat, irrevocably fat. Her appearance was really rather striking. In her shining furs she resembled an enormous, hairy female animal. Her cheeks had folds in them, but her eyes, embedded in fat, were still clear and quick, and the small mouth was greedy and hard.

Some people simply do not seem made for suffering.

Laura had in good time put on a soft, protective layer of fat between herself and the cruel "fimbul" winter of a world in which starvation, pain, hatred, and death in those days did their terrible work.

After some searching they found the road that turned off to Villa Hill. It had not been cleared of snow. There was not a trace of footsteps or of sledge-marks. It was like driving into the desert. One turn and the house lay there apparently quite deserted in its big, wooded park.

To penetrate to the front door was impossible ; the road was blocked by a giant snowdrift. Laura had to trudge through the snow to the kitchen door, where a few tracks really met. A bad-tempered old servant peeped suspiciously out through the half-opened door, but did not want to remove the safety chain.

"I am Countess von Borgk, your mistress's sister. I have an important errand. Open at once, woman."

Laura passed through a kitchen that frightened her appetite to a cold shudder, and was then brought through silent, dusky stairs and passages to the hall.

"You can wait here. The mistress is out, but will soon be back."

Laura sank down on a chair with a grey cover. She had not been out to see Hedvig for years. Ugh! how awful everything looked here—dark, dirty, cold, dilapidated. . . .

Time passed, and Laura grew impatient. She took a peep at the picture galleries. The door was locked, but she found the key on a shelf.

The poor, deserted pictures! Dust, spiders' webs, damp spots, and dust again. Through dirty window-panes, shaded by overgrown fir hedges and entangled branches of creeper, through glass roofs covered by the shrivelled leaves of autumn and the snow of winter, a miserable twilight penetrated. The poor nudes in the pictures shivered in their bare skin over a long, narrow drift that had blown in through a broken window in the roof. The *plein air* and impressionistic landscapes were blotted out by the dust and twilight. The modern brutalities seemed to survive longest. One or two shrill colour-screams still cut through the dark, the icy cold, and the silence like a cry of distress. . . .

Laura huddled up in her furs. This was too dismal. She felt hungry—a desire to chew something—so it was always nowadays if she was exposed to any emotion. She took a packet of tough nougat out of her hand-bag, and took refuge before a big Dutch picture of still life. Chewing and staring at a crowd of hams, salmon, lobsters, oysters, and tankards of ale she thought for the thousandth time: "That Hedvig! That miserable, emaciated misfortune! What a jolly life she might lead if she were not so idiotic!"

Then Laura saw a dark shadow on the window. A woman came stealing out from the edge of the wood. She was thin and bent, and she trudged heavily along in the deep snow. In her skirt she carried a big bundle of branches, brought down by the wind. From under the cap pulled deep down over the eyes she looked with shy, spying glances at the sledge, and then walked quickly up to the kitchen door.

A moment later she slid stealthily and nervously into the hall.

That grey ghost was Hedvig Hill. The world had long ago forgotten that she had been a beauty and had been married to a young, sympathetic patron of art. She generally passed as a half-crazy old maid who was afraid of people, who hated Jews, and hid her money in the seats of chairs. But nobody knew how wealthy she was. Whilst she herself got poorer and poorer and sank into a state of hopeless sterility, her money had multiplied and multiplied. It now represented an enormous sum of power and influence that she could not grasp or imagine.

Hedvig stopped with her hand on the door-knob and stared anxiously at Laura.

"What do you want here?"

Laura swallowed a piece of chocolate.

"Peter has been ill for some time . . . well, it is nothing infectious. . . ."

Hedvig sounded indifferent.

"Well, what about it?"

"He has taken home a creature from Majängen. He imagines it is his son . . . you remember that story? . . ."

An expression of brooding hatred came over Hedvig.

"All men are disgusting brutes," she mumbled.

Laura smiled teasingly.

"I don't agree."

She really writhed with the desire to say something sarcastic, but kept quiet for diplomatic reasons.

Hedvig fidgeted impatiently. She suffered to see Laura's fatness, her furs, her smile.

"But what can I do? Why do you come here?"

"Well, Stellan asked me to fetch you. We must all three go out to Peter. Fancy if he is mad enough to recognise that unfortunate boy as his son!"

On Hedvig's face came an expression of alarmed excitement, of mean spite.

"Would Peter let us suffer for his excesses? . . ."

"Yes; he has been angry with us ever since we took Tord's shares from him. He has got some plan in his head. But be quick, now!"

Hedvig stood hesitating.

"Will you drive me back here after?" she mumbled.

"Of course; you won't have to spend a farthing. But be quick!"

Hedvig disappeared and returned after a good while, stuffed up in a lot of moth-eaten woollen undershirts, jerseys, and shawls, amongst which you could distinguish an old ragged Spanish mantilla fastened about her ears under the hat as if she had toothache.

They were late for Stellan. He had arranged to meet them away out at the toll-house. He did not like to be seen with his sisters, neither the fat one nor the thin one. Frozen and angry, he climbed up into the sledge and pulled the fur rug round him without greeting them. These three, sisters and brother, were not exactly a centre of warmth in the icy-cold winter twilight. And still their meeting was really an extraordinary event, because they never met now except at the annual Board meetings.

Laura sat looking at Stellan, thinking that he had grown ridiculously small. She often thought so of people nowadays. As far as Stellan was concerned it was in some measure true. Without being bent, he had, as a matter of fact, shrunk, sunk into himself. Time had brought to his face-mask stiff folds which would not permit a smile to peep through. The hard, restless eyes seemed to have lost for ever the secret of joy. His whole person diffused solemn boredom of long, echoing passages and big, empty rooms of state.

The silence was only broken by the crunching of the horses' hoofs and the creaking of the runners where the snow was thin. The snow had fallen during a gale, so that in open spaces the road was almost bare between the drifts. They had already passed Ekbacken yard, and the three now drove along the lake, the lake of their childhood. The frosted bushes on the shore resembled enormous fantastic crystal that had grown without sap and lived without life. They leant over a world of ice-floes frozen together, cloven from shore to shore by a black channel of open water. Nothing gave such a shiver of cold as this reeking, trembling open water where the sluggish, poisonous stream of Hel seemed to flow up between the blocks of ice. Over on the other shore there hung a gigantic cloud, like an enormous bird, with the grey colour of primeval time, and laden with pagan cold. Beneath it white globes of light trembled against a smoky, dull-glowing sky, which seemed red from

the reflection of gigantic sacrificial fires. It was the big new works built round the old glue factory. Day and night it shone and roared and hissed on the other shore. Day and night. There the timber of the forests was ground to the finest powder as a substitute for cotton fibre in explosives. A flourishing war industry!

Stellan did not notice that it was the roar of the flight of Nidhögg, who feeds on corpses, that he heard, nor that he passed along Nastrand, the shore of corpses, where the dragon sucks the dead. . . .

The stiff mask lit up for a moment as he lifted a gloved finger in the direction of the arc lamps.

"Good shares," he mumbled. "Rose five to-day again."

"I see," said Laura. "Then I will buy. . . ."

"All right, but don't keep them too long. . . ."

The sledge was already turning up the avenue before Stellan seemed to remember why they were driving out to Selambshof.

"We must go slow with Peter," he said. "If we make a mess of the thing now we shall scarcely have time to repair the damage. At any moment there might be serious complications. Fortunately he does not seem to have written any letters to that woman in Majängen. I mean the mother. And neither has he taken any steps that point to recognition or adoption. I know it both through the coachman and the housekeeper, because I have long been forced to maintain certain relations with them. This war crisis at once sharpened Peter's appetite for unpleasant kinds of business in a way that made it necessary to keep an eye on him. It is not long since he had half Selambshof full of boxes of sugar and butter. Yes, the house was practically used as a warehouse. I was there one evening myself and saw the exquisite portrait of our old grandfather peeping out from behind a pile of boxes of butter. . . . And then his company. He has developed a habit of taking home real criminals, and then they sit up half the night and drink and gamble like madmen. That creature from Majängen is by no means the first of his kind. Peter had scarcely been ill a week when he sent the coachman for him. The mother, who was a well-known termagant, swore and behaved like a lunatic. She would have nothing to do with that devil

at Selambshof,' she said. And even the young rogue himself seemed to have had remorse, for at first he was unwilling to go. But when the coachman returned with certain vague promises, things went more easily, and he ran away from his dear mother to Selambshof."

Laura had listened with great interest.

"I should have liked to see the first touching meeting," she said.

"It can't have been very sentimental. Peter is said to have stared rather angrily at the figure before him, and to have cried: 'You are a lucky young rascal!' And then he asked: 'Can you play camphio?' No, he could not play camphio, but he must have been willing to learn, because from that time the cards were out several evenings one after the other. Now when Peter is too weak himself, the coachman and that creature have to be in with him with cards and alcohol. . . .

"Yes, that is how things are at present. I don't for a moment suppose that Peter's conscience has in any way awakened or that he has grown fond of the scamp. No; he is the slave of his money and nothing else. And now he is working out a trick to keep his fortune together and to cheat his legal heirs."

The sledge stopped; they had arrived.

Selambshof looked higher and gloomier than ever—with all its black windows. In the trees the crows were quarrelling over their perch for the night. Nobody kept them in check any longer, so they collected there every evening. Both horses and people started at the screams of hundreds of black, ghostlike birds in the deep twilight.

An uncanny presentiment of death came over brother and sisters. Selambshof was at one with Peter the Boss. But Selambshof was also their own youth . . . the root of their lives . . . and now Peter was going to die and lots of other things with him. . . .

Laura was frightened and wanted to get out of the sledge.

"No, this is too awful! I am going home again!"

Stellan had to pull her with him. They walked in silently.

Peter had had his bed moved into the office. It stood in the place of the old leather settee underneath the yellow, fly-marked map of Selambshof. A lonely oil-lamp feebly lit

up some soiled glasses on the night-table and his own swollen, puffy, pale face. It really was a room in which an Eskimo might have complained of the lack of comfort. But Peter seemed to think it ought to be like that. He had cheated many in the course of his life, had Peter the Boss—amongst others, himself.

The visit of his sisters and brother did not seem to be unexpected or unwelcome. You could even see a little flash of satisfaction in his features, which seemed to worry Stellan. Hedvig was earnestly requested to keep quiet at first, and even did so, after she had crept away into a corner, wrapped up in all her jerseys and shawls. Otherwise their tones were of the gentlest. They were all kind care, and spoke eagerly of doctors, nurses, cures, during which Laura all the same kept at a certain cautious distance, nervously chewing. . . .

Then a dog was heard to bark outside, a great, dull, subterranean sound, as if it had come from beyond the copper gates of death. All felt a shiver pass through them. Even Peter seemed to feel rather uncomfortable.

"That damned dog!" he swore. "It sounds as if the devil himself was on the way."

Stellan ran to the window. Out in the snow he saw a shadowy figure dancing a sort of war-dance, whilst throwing snowballs and lumps of ice at the furious watch-dog. Thin, lank, with high shoulders and bare hands and head, in spite of the cold, the shadowy figure danced between the drifts.

Stellan turned to Peter.

"It must be your . . . your new boarder. . . . He amuses himself by teasing the dog. . . ."

"I see; is it only little Bernhard?" Peter grunted, relieved. "Yes; he is not exactly a friend of watch-dogs. . . ."

But now Hedvig's voice sounded suddenly from the corner. She sat there looking as old fashioned and moth-eaten, as if she had hung herself away in a wardrobe out of pure meanness and then forgotten where the key was. Her voice also sounded strangely stuffy and dusty.

"You should never have taken up with that woman, Peter," she mumbled. "You should never have taken up with that woman. . . ."

Peter did not seem to have noticed her before. A shiver passed over his swollen features. Hedvig, that ghost from the time of the great fear, again raised a secret anxiety in

his innermost being, right in the centre of the hard annual rings of his soul.

"Aha, is it you, you crotchety old soul?" he muttered. "You are the right person to cheer up an invalid, you are."

After a murderous look at Hedvig, Laura hurried up to Peter. Rustling with silk she came, covered with jewels, the scalps of many men embedded on her swelling bosom. Her voice sounded anxious.

"Dear little Peter, don't make any scandal; it would be an awful scandal!"

Then Stellan came up.

"You must think of our name! Don't believe the story is forgotten. You are confessing that you swore false. A Selamb a perjurer! You can hear for yourself that it is impossible. That creature would be a walking witness to your perjury. It is not possible that you should make such a scandal!"

Peter half rose on his elbow. His pale, puffy face derived new life from his malice. He looked at them with an angry, gallows-bird expression reminiscent of the great family quarrels.

"Scandal!" he panted. "Scandal! That will be for you. Scandal! I shan't suffer from it."

That was, also, an advantage in its way! Peter sank back on his pillow with an expression that almost resembled peace.

The dull barking began again. Once more Stellan saw the dark shadow tumble out into the twilight of the snow-lit garden. Now he was swinging a bottle in his hand. Carefully he staggered closer to the tied-up dog. Then he stood balancing and watching with a cunning smile till he could get in a blow on the head with the bottle. The glass broke, and the contents ran out over the eyes and nose of the dog, so that it crept into its kennel growling and sniffing at the strong alcohol. Now the passage was clear, and the shadowy figure ventured to the window to look in. The face, suddenly pressed flat against the ice-covered window-pane, looked grotesque.

Peter, who did not seem to be unconscious of these happenings, beckoned to the watcher to come in. After some scraping and moving about in the hall, somebody at last groped about for the door handle. The door was slowly and

cautiously pushed open as if by a burglar, and the dog-fighter came in. He remained in a corner where the light was faint, made a movement as if to take off a cap that was not there, whilst his street-arab face, blue with cold, quickly sobered and assumed an insinuating and fawning expression.

You could not say that the heir-presumptive was exactly pleasant to look at. But Peter seemed as pleased as ever. He introduced his son with a mien of having quite unexpectedly, in the eleventh hour, produced out of his sleeve a small, dirty trump that would win the game.

"Yes, here you have the boy. A handsome lad, don't you think so? You, Stellan, have none. And yours ran away, dear Laura. But mine stands here as big as life. And Bernhard is his name."

Bernhard grinned—a grin, however, that faded quickly away when Peter quite unexpectedly began to shower abuse on him because he had touched the whisky without permission.

There followed a moment's icy silence. Stellan went slowly up to Bernhard.

"We have come here for your sake," he said. "My poor brother, whose strength is much reduced by his illness, seems to have got it into his head for some unaccountable reason that you are a relation of his. It is, of course, an absurd mistake. As I don't like mystery, I tell you so openly in his presence."

Bernhard fidgeted but did not dare to answer. He only stared at Peter, who, with eyes half closed, seemed to be waiting.

Stellan looked like the incarnation of impersonal authority, hard as iron and firm as a rock.

"Surely you can understand that we can find doctors and lawyers to clear up this matter," he said.

Peter was still silent, but he began to look as he had done in days gone by when he used to do a stroke of business. He winked with his right eye at Bernhard, whose face suddenly lit up.

"No, thank you, sir—that won't work. That was too simple."

Peter opened both eyes.

"You ought to say 'Uncle,' Bernhard," he said. "You ought to say 'Uncle.'"

Laura could not suppress a little anxious snigger. But

Stellan did not move a feature. He came close up to Bernhard.

"I advise you to be careful," he said. "I have collected some information about you in Majängen, and know exactly how you stand with the police."

Bernhard bit his nails, frightened and furious. He looked again at Peter, who now blinked with both his eyes, and lay down comfortably as if to listen to music. And Bernhard did not disappoint his expectations, but stared Stellan boldly in the face.

"No, Uncle dear, don't come it here with the police, for here you see one of the family."

Stellan turned grey, but still controlled himself.

"I couldn't think of bandying words with you. But if you behave decently we might perhaps compensate you for the vain hopes my brother may have raised. What would you say to a couple of thousand-crown notes and a ticket to America?"

Peter smiled.

"You want him to go to America, do you? So that he might join Laura's Georg—is that it? Well, Bernhard, what do you say to America and the cash? A fine offer, eh?"

"No, thank s; America does not suit me at all."

Peter wagged his head, filled with paternal pride.

"The lad is no fool. I needn't be ashamed of him. I am damned if I don't envy you when I think of all the money you will get."

Now Hedvig's voice was suddenly heard again from the corner.

"You should never have taken up with that woman, Peter. You should never have taken up with that woman."

Stellan grew furious. His thin, bony hands trembled and his voice broke. The brutality of the barrack-room broke through his outer shell. It was terrible to see the aristocratic mask fall so suddenly.

"Shut up, you old goat!" he shouted to Hedvig. Then he held his clenched fist before Bernhard's face.

"And you, you damned young scoundrel, be off in less than no time, or the police will fetch you! Get out now!"

But Bernhard did not get out at all. With this tone he was familiar. It frightened him less than the icy authority before. He jumped closer to the bed and lowered his head

between his shoulders ready for a grip at the throat or a blow at the back of the head. He was evidently prepared for war as one understood it amongst the youth of Majängen.

Peter rose. Yes, he rose up in bed. His pale, puffy face was covered by a broad grin.

"Bravo!" he grunted. "This is better than I thought it would be. I am damned if I am not beginning to feel quite well again!"

He was not unlike the man from Chicago who fainted when he came into the pure air but revived again when somebody held a rotten herring under his nose.

It seemed, as a matter of fact, as if death had for a moment withdrawn from the room before this last grotesque phase of egoism. Poor, overworked death in the third year of the world-war! Coarsened and banalised by the crude slaughter of engines of destruction and by the horribly laconic press announcements. Talk no more of the twinkling evening star and the purifying effect of suffering or of clear vision at the moment of farewell. What an age! when men have grown so empty and hard that they even know no fear. It is as if they no longer existed themselves, but only their machines and their money. Egoism driven to extremes turns into something almost like its opposite. It dies the death of cold, around a soulless mass of cold metal. Life—spontaneous, happy, and suffering life—is nothing; its end cannot therefore be anything either. . . .

Peter was lying with ruined kidneys, and was on the point of collapse. But anything so fine as death, the good old death, he had never met, and was never to meet.

He just fell to pieces.

A first milder paroxysm had come already. Laura suddenly seized Stellan's arm and pointed to the bed. Panic made her mass of flesh tremble. It was an ugly, cowardly fright.

"Come, let us go!" she panted, and pulled her skirts round her as if she had seen a mouse. "I want to get away from this at once!"

Peter had sunk back on the pillow. He moaned heavily, and spasms passed over his shapeless face, whilst one hand groped about on his chest and the other contracted like a claw.

But Stellan pulled himself together with a furious effort.

His face grew cold and hard. This was the last chance. Now the last card was being played. He pushed away Laura and bent quickly over Peter with a low but penetrating whisper:

"You are not going to steal from us and make a scandal, Peter. The slightest effort will be the end. Let us separate as friends!"

Peter struggled with his growing weakness. He forced the words out with a tremendous effort:

"The Will . . . clear . . . all clear. . . ."

Stellan bent still lower. It sounded as if he had wanted to push each word like a probe into the invalid's conscience:

"We shall oppose the Will . . . there will be a lawsuit . . . do you hear, a lawsuit!"

"I shall . . . win . . . win. . . ."

"You will be declared of unsound mind. The Will will be declared null."

"No . . . I shall win . . . win. . . ."

And it sounded as if a secret, malicious satisfaction irresistibly overcame his cramp and pain. Peter the Boss will bring an action, Peter the Boss will win. What the deuce does it matter, then, if he happens to be dead?

Laura had already fled. Stellan followed slowly, after having telephoned for the doctor. Hedvig came last. In the door she turned, stared at her dying brother, and mumbled again obstinately, like a monomaniac:

"You should never have taken up with that woman, Peter. You should never have taken up with that woman. . . ."

But Bernhard had sunk down on a chair by the bed, pale, sick, red-eyed. In his bold, restless eyes there appeared something like tears. Youth, even neglected and criminal youth, has always a softer fibre. The real blindness, cruelty, and sterility lies on the other side of the midday line.

A few days later Peter the Boss went to sleep, having never wakened again while he lived. His egoism survived him. Blind and unredeemed, it still survived in his stupid, cunning will. "My money shall rule them," he had thought. "They shan't pass over Peter the Boss so easily." And neither did they.

The will showed that he had not taken any steps legally

to recognise his son. He simply made him his sole heir—but with the important and particularly sound reservation that he should not dissipate the fortune but only draw the interest. To this will were attached, however, a lot of strange conditions which really seemed to have been added only to give the disappointed heirs a tempting opportunity. Thus the heir, if he wanted to retain the inheritance, must always remain clean shaven like the testator when alive, never travel in motor-cars, never back any bills or go abroad. Strange also was the way he had remembered his dear sisters and brother. To Stellan was bequeathed Peter's watch, an old silver turnip which the lord of Trefvinge would not even touch with his fingers. Hedvig got the humble stock of old clothes of the deceased, and Laura was consoled with the yacht *Laura*, laid up in the yard, at Ekbacken with all its inventory, as, for instance, anchor, buoy, ensign staff, and glass rack, all in memory of her beloved first husband, Herman Hermansson.

This will was the tombstone of Peter the Boss, and his relations celebrated its unveiling by a long and scandalous lawsuit in which nothing of the Selamb nature was hidden from the eyes of the world. Against Levy, whom Peter had had the good idea of appointing executor of the will and who now got a welcome opportunity for revenge both on Laura and Hedvig, a whole army of lawyers and psychologists was mobilised. The Selamb brother and sister were now no longer afraid of scandal. These people, who were really choking with money, tore every shred of cover from the deceased and scratched the brain out of his skull, in order to fling it on the judge's table. The whole press of the country echoed these magnificent disclosures. From the court of first instance to that of final instance this comedy of greed dragged its way along, but Peter was too cunning for his opponents and won his lawsuit in the end, as he had said. Yes, one may really say that it was Peter who won and not his son. That young rogue had, as might have been expected, not been able to support his good fortune, but by the time of the final settlement of the case already lay in hospital, having drunk himself to death.

Already during his lifetime Peter had been moderately well known, but now under the plain stone out in the New Cemetery he grew to a type of power. He was accepted

and quoted. People told anecdotes about him, laughed at those he had tricked, and shrugged their shoulders at his enemies. The masses in the end always capitulate to a scoundrel of coarser calibre than themselves. And when nowadays a poor, honest bourgeois who has been working hard the whole week takes his Sunday walk beyond the toll-bar and catches sight of Selambshof, he forgets all that was done up there in that robbers' stronghold in order to hamper his own life and make it more difficult and expensive. And he points at the false Gothic over the edge of the forest and exclaims :

• "Look! That's where that scoundrel Peter Selamb lived! Do you know what he used to say? 'God will surely feed the hawk,' he used to say. And that is true enough—for he cheated the town of a good round sum. Twelve millions he left behind him, that scoundrel, Peter Selamb!"

There is secret admiration in his voice. The heart swells so strangely in the poor little bourgeois, just as does the heart of a soldier when you tell him about Napoleon.

Here ends this book, which has told of such as prefer to hunt alone.

Georg Herrmannson is at the moment of writing already a prominent engineer in Philadelphia. As far as we can see, he will soon have to return home to take over the greater part of the spoil. Who knows? perhaps he will one day fight the battle of civilisation with the ill-gotten wealth of the Selambs against those who hunt in flocks. The best days of the Selamb system are now over, and the egoism of the masses is perhaps now the greater danger.

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